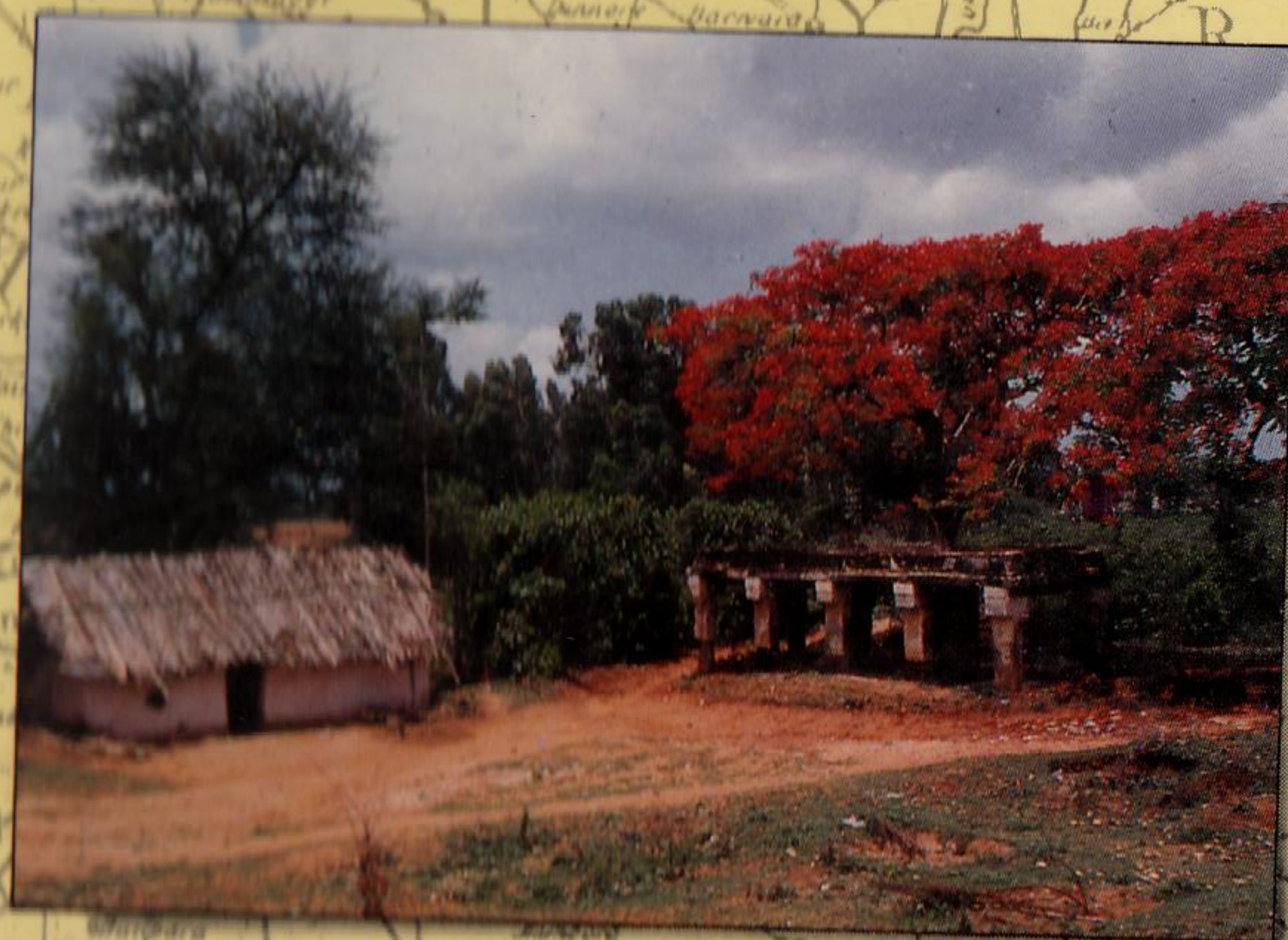
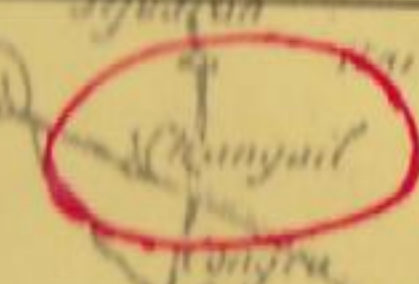




# CHANGEL

The Biography of a Village



ARVIND N. DAS

The story of a village marooned in time

As a student of St Stephen's College in the late Sixties, Bachcha's preoccupations have to do with the happenings in China, the war in Vietnam, the Beatles and Bob Dylan... Then, a letter summoning him to his grandmother's funeral in Changel, a remote village in Bihar, focuses his attention closer home.

He makes the difficult journey to Changel, expecting to arrive at the idyllic setting of his childhood holidays, only to discover that while its pastoral scenery remains the same, the village has witnessed no essential developmental change.

The village still has no road connecting it to the outside world, no electricity or potable water, and caste divisions have only partly been replaced by those of class. Changel has sent its children out into the world, but the world, it appears, has forgotten Changel.

How, Bachcha wonders, did Changel survive in virtual isolation for 300 years? How had it come into existence at all? He sets out to resolve the riddle of its origins and in the process, discovers his own roots.

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Arvind N. Das is a social scientist and journalist. He studied and has taught history, economics and management and has written several books and academic papers. Among his most recent books are *India Invented* (Delhi: Manohar) and *The Republic of Bihar* (Delhi: Penguin). He is one of the editors of *Biblio: A Review of Books* and Managing Director of Asia-Pacific Communication Associates (APCA), a multi-media organisation managed by independent professionals. Most recently, he has been engaged in producing and directing a multi-part television serial on Indian history and culture explored in historical outline.

He continues to keep one foot in academics as a visiting professor in several institutions in India and abroad and a toehold on journalism as a columnist contributing to newspapers and magazines.

He tries to live at least for a part of every year in a village in north Bihar, much like the one whose biography follows.





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*For  
Srijana  
and other 'citizens' of Changel*

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# Contents

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<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Entering a Caveat</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>A Pre-history</i>	<i>xvii</i>
The Discovery	1
A Revisit	7
The Problems of Discovery	17
The Myth of Creation	25
The Myth of the Creators	31
A Rule of Property over Changel	35
Maliks and Servants	41
The Market Nexus (circa 1750 to 1780)	47
God and Mammon	52
Flies in the Ointment	59
Tradition and Religion	65
The Raj of Zamindars and Others (circa 1780 to 1880)	69
From 'Babua' to 'Babusaheb'	80



Reaction and Impoverishment (circa 1880 to 1910)	85
Continuity and Backwardness (circa 1910 to 1930)	98
Vulnerability to Crisis (circa 1930 to 1940)	117
Changing Prospects (circa 1940 to 1950)	125
Post-Independence (circa 1950 to 1970)	134
Travelling on a Loop Line	151
Struggle Over Land (1970-1980)	158
Time Again	165
Rural Retribution	171
An Ongoing Journey through Space and Time	180
Glossary	184



## *Acknowledgements*

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I HAVE RECEIVED the help of so many people in getting together this story on Changel that it is impossible to thank them all individually. At least four generations of the people of Changel have contributed towards making the material available for putting together this biography of their village. How can I thank them all?

Many people from outside the village too have helped in many ways. Were it not for the insistence of Professor Jan Brëman, this tale could never have been put down on paper. Manoshi Mitra contributed in many more ways than merely by getting the manuscript ready for publication. My father and Srijana provided the perspectives of different generations on Changel.

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This is perhaps one of very few biographies that seek to deal not with individuals but with groups—in this case, a village. And yet it is, in the end, one person's



ordered the crucifixion of Jesus, but are as confused about the nature of veracity. Psephologists and psychologists are honest enough to admit that they have often to contend with the 'lie factor' in the course of their professional work. Other social scientists are not so candid and the truth is that lies are not told only by respondents.

We do not refer to wilful and deliberate deceit, the cooking up of data and its unscrupulous manipulation to arrive at convenient conclusions. These are not as uncommon among the practitioners of social sciences as we would like, but here we are talking about the basic methodological concern of determining what constitutes fact in social investigation. The issues of objectivity and alienation, bias and subjectivity have been done to death in scientific debates and yet we are no clearer about the answer. On the contrary, as we discover more and more complexities about social phenomena and invent more and more complex methods of analysing them, truth and fact get lodged ever deeper in the miasma of deconstruction and discourse. As if what is obvious to the naked eye were not inexact enough, we have to now assume that what is spoken or written is also not an accurate representation of meaning: the witness, my lord and members of the jury, is presumed guilty unless proved innocent. The presumption of mendacity is universalised.

If establishing who said and did what is confusing, the confusion is further confounded by introducing the dimensions of time and space in social sciences. Neither are men and women similar all over the world nor are they alike at all times. Thus, location-specificity and temporality are both essential features of social science research.

Nevertheless, social scientists often ignore one or the other of these factors which, indeed, constitute the parameters for analysing and understanding human and

social action. As Robinson Crusoe discovered, if no man is an island unto himself, no island is a complete universe either. And yet, economists have used the case of the man marooned on an island to demonstrate theories ranging from those on marginal returns to the ultimate triumph of the mysterious forces of the market. Other social scientists too have taken the micro accurately enough to represent the macro and have sought to analyse the ocean in a drop of water.

Tackling the fourth dimension of time is a little more difficult and many social scientists ignore it altogether. They cut a section from society, preserve it in the formaldehyde of statistics and examine it under their many methodological microscopes to discern the patterns within it. Temporality and history are seen as unnecessary and irritating diversions.

Perspectives in social sciences get further distorted on account of pet theories. In terms of understanding Indian society, a large number of analysts begin with the conclusion that class exists only as a figment of the imagination of disgruntled and disaffected intellectuals. Such Parsonian pedants cast their finely meshed sociological nets into the murky waters of India and come up only with the familiar fishes of caste and tribe; they cannot find class anywhere and conclude that it does not exist in reality. To use a metaphor from E.P. Thompson, such analysts go down with much conceptual huffing and puffing into the social engine room and look for class in this or that part of the machine. They are triumphant when they cannot find it. However, they do not recognise that class is not this nut or that bolt but the very motion, the friction, the heat, the thundering noise.

Then, on the other side of the ideological divide, there are those who recognise the reality of class but see it as a set of convenient pigeon-holes into which social segments can be neatly fitted. With extreme methodological vulgarity,



they convert class into a category, forgetting that it is a process which is both historical and political. Thus, except when seen in the *longue durée*, class, in the complex sense of the term, evades analysts as they focus their attention on things and events rather than on trends.

There is gender too. Women exist in society in numbers almost equal to men and yet, barring the honourable exception of self-conscious gender studies, much of social science research work would seem to suggest that women were generally absent from the social scene. Anthropological studies do take note of the role of women in rituals and other social observances but many economists, for instance, generally assume that the existence of only one single male Robinson Crusoe as an economic animal is sufficient for them to prove their theories. And yet the fact is that not only do women play a vital biological role but they also make immense economic contributions. So it is not only politically correct to recognise that women do exist and work but it is necessary for social science to note the existence of women as much as that of men.

Nevertheless, despite the best intent, what happens is that the content of social research often gets determined by who carries it out. In most villages, for example, male researchers encounter a problem of access to the womenfolk and the most rigorous modes of participant observation cannot obviate it.

Language and its broader form, discourse, too present hurdles. Every society has an in-language which is difficult for the outsider to decipher since the discourse comprises not only what is spoken or written but also what is inherent on account of tradition, custom and relationships. Besides, discourse is made even more oblique in life through the use of metaphors, allegories and proverbs and the most astute de-constructionist encounters difficulties in coping with these. Even if the 'lie factor' is

discounted, it is by no means simple to figure out if people speak what they mean or mean what they speak. In any event, deconstruction and discourse analysis, although recently rediscovered by historians and others, have a venerable ancestry. Two philosophers early in this century, very different in their philosophic interests and methods, had understood the need to go beyond and behind words. Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the important thing about a proposition was not whether it was 'true' but what it meant. At about the same time, R.G. Collingwood wrote in his book, *The Idea of History*, that the historian ought to ask his 'evidence' not if it is true but 'Why does the author of the document, record or report say that—what does he mean to convey?' The attempt to construct oral history makes this task even more difficult.

The social scientist has also to cope with moral dilemmas relating to accountability and responsibility. It is all right to speak of reporting the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but every field observer has come across occasions when complete and absolute veracity can cause not only acute embarrassment but even do damage to the people written about. Even reducing live flesh-and-bone human beings into numbers does not necessarily obviate this problem and every social scientist has to fabricate his or her own method to deal with this.

Finally, there is the problem of perspective. It is not only that reality grows on the observer but that the observer too grows on the reality. Natural sciences have developed methods to compensate for data distortions caused by the very phenomenon of observation but social sciences have still to come to grips with this. The problem of subjectivity-objectivity apart, there is also the issue of relativity. The same tree can appear to loom large to a child but become stunted for an adult. Add to this



complication the myths and legends through the mists of which the observer, child or adult, has to perceive reality at different times and in different stages, and the error of parallax appears trivial by comparison.

In short, it is perhaps never possible to carry out creative social science except as fiction and to acknowledge that there is indeed not such a great gulf between the two. Some of the most perceptive accounts of society have been produced not by earnest social scientists armed with notebooks, tape-recorders and, lately, laptop computers but by writers who have experienced society as they lived in it and whose only reconstructive tools have been their own minds. At the same time, the element of extrapolation, if not also that of outright invention, in much of what is best in social sciences cannot be sneezed at either.

With that remark, let us go on to the pre-history of this book which also aims to pass off as history.



## *A Pre-history*

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WHAT DOES A dilettante academic do when he is suddenly asked by the Erasmus University of Rotterdam to give a seminar on a subject of his choice? His task is complicated not only because he has not had enough notice but also because he knows that in the audience there will be at least two formidable Indian scholars, the economist Sukhamoy Chakravarty and the sociologist Andre Beteille. He feels naturally diffident in such a setting to hold forth either on economics or on sociology *per se*. Anthropology and social psychology are too technical for both the speaker and the audience and history is not a subject but a mere method and, in the aftermath of *Subaltern Studies*, he cannot be sure of even that. Discourse analysis, semeiotics and de-construction are in vogue but their application is still so vague as to make it difficult to make them the central points of an intelligible seminar.

It is thus that the choice fell on telling a story, a tale of one village, Changel in north Bihar, with economics, sociology, semeiotics and history as its ingredients. And, as the story was being told, it acquired its own body: various characters made their appearance and, although dialogue got left out in the telling, discourse came in regardless. That distracting but elusive aspect of social



science, passion, also intruded as the tale unfolded. But it remained oral history still.

It is because of the persistence of Professor Jan Breman of the Centre for Asian Studies, Amsterdam, and the interest shown by Professor Ghanshyam Shah of the Centre for Social Studies, Surat, that the story got written. A 'scholasticised' version was presented at a seminar in Surat and it was published as a monograph in the Comparative Asian Studies Programme (CASP) series by Erasmus University, Rotterdam. Later, a revised version was published in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, London, and it benefited greatly from the editing done by Professor Terry Byres.

It was curious how the story of Changel then started acquiring its own momentum. A village which had apparently dropped out of the world appeared to have got suddenly globalised. Some Australian academics who were preparing a handbook on India included the Changel story in the anthology and it became familiar to young Australians working on Indian studies. And students in the University of Virginia at Charlottesville hotly debated over the intricacies of rural existence as depicted in the case of Changel. It was not quite a *Village Remembered* but it did start getting to be a village recognised.

Meanwhile, a migrant from Changel to a rather obscure town in Madhya Pradesh came across a copy of the CASP monograph. He was a compounder and knew English. He read the story of his village and, when he went to his 'native place' as such migrants are wont to do, he spoke about the publication to some fellow villagers. The story got both simplified and embellished in the translated telling and became the subject of some heated dispute in Changel. Some villagers felt proud that their ancestors had found mention in cold print; others felt that justice had not been done to them. Most resented that the tale had been told in a language they had no access to.

In any event, the characters in the research study became the subjects of its shaping. They started gathering such 'objective' evidence as they could unearth. Genealogical tables and land transfer documents, astrological almanacs and artifacts of everyday use were gathered and made available to construct a more 'complete' story. Stories accumulated and memories multiplied. All this happened with alarming intensity and the very thread of the story, the umbilical cord that connected it to its parent reality, appeared to be getting so entangled as to strangle it even before it could progress beyond the foetal state. A Caesarian was called for, an operation that would artificially, and perhaps even a little prematurely, deliver the literary baby.

This is the result. Whether it is fact or fiction is for the reader to judge.





# *The Discovery*

---

IT WAS A lazy November afternoon in Delhi's St. Stephen's College. Classes were more or less over. Students had gathered in the mess; grace had been said from the 'high table' and lunch had been eaten. It was a world of English-speaking youth, assuring themselves of bright futures as part of the country's alienated elite even as they enjoyed themselves in genteel, fun-filled trivial pursuits. There was little to connect them to the real rural India.

And yet, the ties were not altogether absent. Even as the students trooped out of the dining hall, the postman was waiting. He gave out letters to those students who 'heard from home'. One particular first year student who got infrequent letters was surprised to get one that day. It was a blue inland letter form and the neat, well-formed script on the address told him that it was from the boy's grandfather. He opened the letter even as he continued to walk down the corridor, and glanced at it casually, expecting that it would contain the usual bits of news and advice which the old man occasionally dished out. And indeed most of the letter was just that. 'My Dear Bachcha,' it began, for that is how the grandfather referred to the first-born of his own first-born, and continued in the familiar vein. It was only towards the end that the real



news came: 'Your grandmother passed away yesterday,' it said almost casually. 'The cremation has already taken place but the *shradhh* is still to take place. Come to Changel if you can. Yours affectionately, Baba,' the letter concluded.

For the boy, the letter marked the beginning of a discovery. In the first place, he was shaken by the news of the death of his grandmother, a lady who had always been inordinately fond of him and from whom he had heard stories not only from the ancient epics but also about his immediate ancestry. He had heard about the privations of the family when his grandfather had courted arrest at the call of Gandhi during the freedom struggle. About how that frail lady had managed somehow to keep the family hearth warm during those horrible years when there was no breadwinner, when the family house had collapsed during the 1934 earthquake, when the family's lands had been auctioned off for failure to pay rent to the *zamindars* who had managed somehow, anyhow, to do the family out of its hereditary titles. About how the boy's father had been sworn not to take up a government job as long as the *gora raj* continued to rule over India. He had also heard from her gossip and fact about the village in a sequence which made it impossible for him to distinguish between the two, not that the boy was particularly interested. But, the lady had nevertheless managed to make even that alienated boy, who had little concern with lived history, and even less with the fantastic sociology of Changel, feel that he belonged to Changel. And that lady had now become mere memory, almost an addendum to a letter written by a lonely old man who was villager enough to care about the *shradhh* and Anglicised enough to maintain a stiff upper lip.

But the immediate concern in Bachcha's young but pragmatic mind was not with grief and loss and the wrenching feeling of growing loneliness. It was with how

to get to Changel. He knew where it was but, like the fantastic sociology of the village, its geography too was more mythical than real as far he was concerned. He had never gone there alone.

The journey to Delhi Junction railway station was easy enough and it was also not too difficult to get into a train going to Lucknow from there. At Lucknow too the transfer to another unreserved third class compartment in a train going to Muzaffarpur was achieved without a serious problem. He continued throughout the journey to be the alienated young boy that he was, silently looking at the countryside fleeting by even as his fellow-passengers wondered about his travelling alone and with a sombreness unsuited to his age. Sociology impinged on his existence only at Muzaffarpur station.

The train reached Muzaffarpur at midnight and he had no idea about how to get from there to Changel which is a long way off from its district headquarter. Not knowing what to do, Bachcha walked into the stationmaster's office to see what he could find out. The stationmaster was an elderly man, quite relaxed since the last mail train for the night had passed his station without a problem. He looked curiously at the boy diffidently entering his office and noticed that he was wearing a blazer with the crest of a well-known Patna school: quite obviously, he was therefore neither a vagrant nor someone who had run away from home. The boy enquired about how to get to Changel from Muzaffarpur. The stationmaster did not have the slightest idea of where Changel was. Then he asked why the boy wanted to go there, wherever it was. When told that it was for a funeral, he grew suitably serious. 'Whose funeral?' he asked. 'My grandmother's,' Bachcha replied. 'And who is your grandfather?' asked the friendly stationmaster. Even as Bachcha told him the name, the fact struck him that there had been a gender switch in the subject of enquiry: in that society, the person



who had died was not relevant if she was a woman; it was the man who defined her identity who was important. The boy suppressed the sudden twinge of personal grief that surfaced and let pragmatism once again take hold of him.

The very mention of Prabhu Narain, the grandfather's name, fairly well-known in Muzaffarpur because of his involvement in the freedom movement, immediately put the boy on a social grid comprising an intricate mesh of caste, class, status and ritual. The stationmaster got even friendlier than earlier. He got one of his flunkies to find out the best way to get to Changel: a ramshackle bus leaving early in the morning for a village about three kilometres from Changel. He also asked Bachcha where he was studying and how he planned to go back to Delhi, advising him to get reservations for the return journey. Finally he asked how the boy was planning to spend the rest of the night and on being told that there was no specific plan, advised him to buy a second class ticket, costing fifty paise, to the next station and sleep in the second class waiting room there. The boy discovered how rules are subservient to 'connections'. The discovery had just begun.

It continued the next morning in the bus. As the boy entered the already crowded vehicle and looked around despairingly for a seat for the long journey ahead, several people asked him where he was going. There was no cultivated 'British' reticence among those who travelled by that bus; they proceeded also to find out the name of the boy's family, his caste, where he studied, what his father did and asked quite innocently about how much his father would be earning. Such inquisitiveness annoyed Bachcha but he consoled himself with the pragmatic thought that at least it yielded a seat: other, obviously less 'deserving' passengers were asked to vacate their seats to make him comfortable. Another lesson in political economy had been learnt outside college.

Finally, after much straining, the bus reached Baigana, the village closest to Changel on the barely motorable road. Bachcha got off and started walking in the general direction that was pointed out to him. The track was lonely and, in every stereotypical respect, matched the idyllic rural setting that he had read about. He felt himself prepared to enter his village as an almost-adult for the very first time.

What he had not counted on was the existence of the Pahal, an old river bed that lay across the track to Changel. Most of the year, the Pahal remained dry and carts could rumble across it, but it got flooded during the monsoon and often the water stayed till late November. There was water in the Pahal when Bachcha reached there and he did not know how to cross it. In despair, he sat down by the bank and waited for some other traveller to come by so that they could together find some way of traversing the stream. It was a long wait till finally, late in the afternoon, a person showed up. He was not from Changel but from a village even further away but he knew that nearby there was a boatman who could be hailed and persuaded to take passengers across. He proceeded to shout and yell, much to the discomfiture of Bachcha who had learnt in his English-medium school that it was bad manners to make a racket. However, he quickly got over his uneasiness when the boatman actually materialised and said that he was prepared to ferry the two passengers across on the payment of 50 paise each. Another scene followed as Bachcha's companion argued long and hard that the charge was exorbitant. Once again Bachcha felt embarrassed both by the man's penury or greed—whichever motivated the haggling—as well as by his own relative affluence. Finally, after a long argument, the deal was struck: it would cost each passenger only 25 paise to be ferried across.

Both got into the boat and immediately the boatman



began interrogating Bachcha about his destination, antecedents and anything else that occurred to him. However, as soon as he had received enough information to place Bachcha accurately on his socio-economic grid, not only did the questioning cease but he in fact began addressing the boy as *malik* (master). This was the first time that Bachcha had thus been addressed and it added to his unease. The discomfort was enhanced when, after reaching the far bank of the Pahal, the boatman refused to take payment from him even as the other passenger was made to quickly shell out his own fare. The explanation for introducing the non-monetary element into the commercial transaction was convoluted: apparently, the boy's family had some kind of proprietorial right over a part of the Pahal and could therefore 'legitimately' commandeer transport across it.

In any event, the tough part of the journey was over and Changel lay barely a kilometre away, nestling in its obscurity. For Bachcha, it held several discoveries, many of them about himself.



## A Revisit

---

DOES A VILLAGE exist in reality? Or is it merely a construct of sociologists and others who are forever looking for an ideal type of a simplified social structure which provides an easy universe for investigation? Are the characteristics of the village essential to define it conceptually? And, if so, what are those characteristics?

Quite obviously, the self-contained and self-sufficient nature of the village is a mere myth. No village is an island unto itself. This is not only in the field of economics and politics but also in the context of the so-called village community. The many forward and backward linkages which tie the village to the rest of the world exist in fact though not necessarily in the scheme of analysts. These are manifest in the case of Changel.

Take an event that took place in 1994. A few labourers from Changel arrived in Delhi with the news that one of the most prominent residents in the village had passed away. This information was conveyed in a very vague form to the children of that villager. They were quite naturally concerned and tried to verify the news. This was particularly so since they knew that rumours had a weird habit of travelling out of the village. They used all their connections in order to get authentic information. Not only did they contact almost all the hundred people



or more from the village who lived in Delhi, but also spoke on the telephone to a person in Patna and asked him to travel personally to the village, about 150 kilometres away, to find out what, if anything, had happened.

It was then that Changel's tenuous links with the outside world were dramatically demonstrated. The person despatched from Patna did not report back for nearly 36 hours: he had covered most of the distance speedily enough but he had got stuck in the flooded bed of the Pahal channel three kilometres from Changel and could not reach the village for several hours. Meanwhile, the family in Delhi were getting frantic. It was, of course, not possible to telephone Changel or any nearby village since the nearest public telephone was more than 16 kilometres away from Changel and was mostly out of order. Thus, they tried to use the government's channels of communication in the fond belief that the long arm of the state would reach even this village. They met with a helpful response. The District Magistrate of Muzaffarpur promised to find news soon and indeed he tried his best. He sent a wireless message to the nearest police station at Katra, ten kilometres away from Changel, asking that the police should report about any untoward incident. The problem was that the wireless equipment at Katra was not working since the cash-strapped Bihar government did not have the wherewithal to maintain it.

Then a person was despatched from Muzaffarpur on a motorcycle to go to Changel and report on the scene there. He was waylaid several kilometres away from the village by local lumpens who now collect a toll from all passers-by. Since he was not carrying enough cash to bribe his way through, he too was detained.

Personal contact had failed. Telephonic communication was impossible. Even wireless has proved ineffective in getting information out of Changel even as the village was standing, along with the rest of the world, at the very

threshold of the 21st century.

And yet, Changel is not an isolated village. There is a considerable flow of information into it even through hi-tech channels. Radios had arrived in the village years ago. Recently even television had made its appearance. The result were bizarre. For instance, a few years ago, a person from Changel was supposed to have been travelling on the Air-India plane *Kanishka* which crashed off Ireland on its way from Canada to London. Reports of the air crash were telecast widely and were received even in Changel but it was not possible to get information on that particular individual into the village from Delhi to allay anxiety. Neither telegraphic nor speedy postal contact was possible and a person had to be sent wading through the flood waters which surrounded Changel then, to undertake a long journey by bus and train to Delhi. The onward and return journeys took more than a week.

However, it is not that there is only a one-way flow as far as Changel is concerned. For some decades now, the village subsists on the remittances sent by its migrants who work in various capacities outside its boundaries. The qualitative difference in recent years is that not only are people from the village engaged in low-paid jobs outside but that several have also entered the high-income brackets.

There is the case of one of the descendants of the original *pundits* who had settled in the village actually moving into the 'modern sector'. A few years before he moved from the village to Kanpur and joined a truck transport agency. Through a series of fortuitous happenings, he himself acquired first one and then a fleet of trucks. He now has offices in Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore and employs nearly twenty-five people from Changel in his enterprises. More importantly, he remits fairly large quantities of money to the village and is building a set of 'modern' apartments which mimic urban



living in a rural context. The economic pump-priming which this inflow effects in the village is significant enough, but there are in addition the small and essentially charitable remittances that the person sends to indigent relatives, thereby creating a new order of patronage-clientilism in the village.

There is yet another instance of inflow into Changel. There are many people from the village who work in the 'informal sector' in cities like Delhi. Indeed, the people who are engaged in this sphere live together and in one sense re-create the traditional village relationships in the city. The *dhanuks* and *khatbeys*, for instance, drive rickshaws; the *noniyas* maintain the communal kitchen and the *brahmins* or *kayasthas* maintain the accounts. The rickshaw-drivers are poor and cannot afford to buy their own vehicles; they take them on hire.

From this fact arose an interesting episode. Two rickshaw-drivers who had got disgusted with such degrading urban living decided to cut loose: they got on to the rickshaws and drove off all the way to Changel nearly 1,500 kilometres away. The result is that today Changel has acquired this 'modern' means of transportation.

Other changes have also taken place, signifying the obliteration of the boundaries of the political-economy and society of the village. So much so that today genuine doubts can be expressed about the very exclusive entity of the village. Much has changed in Changel. Much more is likely to change as the processes of integration and even globalisation speed up and suck the village into the vortex of transformation.

The period from the 1970s has seen the return to the village of the first generation of migrants who have started retiring from urban jobs. They had got used to some city comforts and had small savings in the form of their providend funds and pensions. Among the first

things they did was to renovate or rebuild their ancestral houses, using brick and cement. The traditional *hulas* (blacksmith-cum-carpenter-cum-mason) changed his tools and became a *mistri* (master mason). Some social solecisms were committed by urbanised, housecoat-clad daughters-in-law who referred to the elderly village craftsmen and feudal retainers by the familiar '*tum*' rather than the moral formal '*aap*' or '*ahan*' (all these being variants of 'you') which their mothers-in-law and grandmothers-in-law had used. But these lapses, as spoken by the younger generation in *khari boli* (pure, urban) Hindi (which incidentally, many villagers thought to be conversation in *Angrezi* or English) instead of the traditional Maithili, were taken to be the price of progress.

But did Changel really progress? There is still no road connecting it with the outside world and, seasonally, it is as isolated as it has always been. Electric poles have been erected, and wires strung on them, but electricity is still a long way off. Pump-sets can be heard spluttering in the fields but their functioning is dependent on the irregular and capricious supply of diesel. Spare parts are still to be obtained only from distant Darbhanga. A Block Department Office at Katra is supposed to promote agriculture, but villagers going there to obtain urea against permits issued by the village *mukhiya* have been lathi-charged. There is no sanitation, no drainage and although Changel is within the range of two television broadcast and relay stations, one at Muzaffarpur (for local programmes) and another at Darbhanga (for Delhi-based national programmes), as well as very much within the 'footprint' area of satellite television stations, there is no source of safe drinking water save the few private handpumps set up by the urban returnees. Two handpumps were set up by the state in the early 1960s, one in the main village and one in the area of the untouchables, but they have hardly functioned for the last



30 years. They have become vestigial monuments of the past of the village.

The nearest telegraph office is ten kilometres away and the nearest primary health centre twelve. There are enough transistors in the village for people to hear about the INSAT and other satellites but, of course, there is hardly a working telephone within a radius of 60 kilometres. While one of the residents of the village now gets an irregular supply of a daily newspaper brought to him by the conductor of the 'Video Coach' who lives in the neighbouring hamlet, there is no qualified medical service. The quacks cheat the poor and ignorant people by injecting them with distilled water and poisoning them with allopathic high-cost drugs, but for the most part tradition and superstition prevail. Newly-born children still have their umbilical cords cut with septic tiles by the village *chamain* (midwife) and victims of snakebite are taken to the *ojhas* (witch doctors) to be cured. And for illness, as for any other distress, the ultimate hope is in the divine beneficence of Mahadev and Bhagwati.

As is usual with such villages, Changel was generally outside the direct realm of the development agencies of the state. Such development as took place in agriculture or housing was the result of private initiative and even that was vitiated by bureaucratic corruption and the insensitivity of the local instruments of government. And yet, the intervention of governmental measures cannot be entirely written off. There are the electric poles and wires which some day will bring electricity. A government pump-set is being erected on what used to be the cremation ground in the south of the village: it will not function until power comes, and perhaps remain mostly idle (like government tubewells in other parts of Bihar) even after that, but it is a veritable monument to the efforts of a developmentalist state.

The 'socialist'/populist state has also registered its

presence through two notable measures. One is the scheme of giving pensions to indigent widows. Some 20 families in Changel are supposed to benefit from this. The pension of Rs 100 is supposed to be disbursed monthly; rarely does it come before three or four months, and even then not more than two-thirds of the money due reaches the beneficiaries, the rest being appropriated by several levels of the bureaucracy and *panchayat* as 'service charges'. But even the small amounts that do reach the concerned families have made an impact on the levels of living of the poorest of the poor who belong to almost all the caste groups. Further, they put much more cash into circulation (through petty moneylending), thus creating a chain of effects on others too.

The second measure is the construction of houses for the Harijans (Dalits). This benefits only a very small number, there being no more than a dozen such households in a total population now exceeding 3,000 (and a resident population of more than 2,000) and even in this there is a great degree of corruption, with fourth-grade bricks and other building materials being used by the *panchayat* in their construction, but the very possibility that some day even the Dalits will live in pucca houses has a demonstrative effect on the others.

These populist measures, marginal as they may seem, have had a significant political impact. The sporadic attempts to set up some measures of organisation among the rural poor, in a period when traditional patron-client bonds were snapping, may have had some success, but such attempts received a serious set-back as the poor began to find new patrons, outside the village, in far-away Patna or even Delhi. Thus, when the news came in 1984 (via the numerous transistors) of the assassination of the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, and the radio continued to describe the bereavement of the people of India, the poor villagers of Changel too, in particular the indigent



widows, wailed in grief at the demise of their distant benefactor whom they had only vaguely heard about. After the *shradhh* ceremony for Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, the first *shradhh* of an 'outsider' to Changel was organised for Mrs Gandhi. There were also expressions of anger, particularly by the agricultural labourers who had experience of Punjab, against the Sikh assailants of the Prime Minister. And when election day came less than two months after that, the villagers of Changel voted overwhelmingly for Mrs Gandhi's son and heir and her Congress Party.

However, the fact that this electoral response had no long-term basis became clear in the subsequent elections in 1989-90. By then the magic of Mrs Gandhi had long worn out and the message of her son Rajiv Gandhi about marching ahead to the 21st century had not quite reached Changel. Meanwhile, inflation and corruption continued to plague the villagers and 'primordialist' caste loyalties also asserted themselves. Thus, as the political consolidation of 'backward' classes (castes) took place in Bihar in general and Laloo Prasad Yadav became its chief beneficiary, in Changel, too, the *yadavas*, *noniyas* and other 'backwards' discovered their political ethnicity.

In terms also of the economic organisation of the village, certain significant features have emerged. The class division has been altered quite radically. Many of the *zamindars* have disappeared and the holdings of the landlords have been severely fragmented, by and large, with the result that several former landlords have been forced to take part in cultivation as middle peasants. Others, who still observe caste taboos against labouring in the fields, consider their lands only as secondary sources of income, mainly relying on non-agricultural occupations. They get their lands cultivated either through *jiratiyas* or *gumashtas* (managers) belonging to lower castes or through *batai* (sharecropping). However, the *batai* system

is gradually going out of vogue because of the capital-intensity of new crops. Most small parcels of land which are still given on a sharecropping basis are leased out more to ensure the leasers' and their families' labour in peak seasons than as the principal mode of agricultural organisation. Some other upper and middle caste landowners have diversified into trade, selling cloth, kerosene, milk, groceries and the like. The successful ones among them have enhanced their economic position while others have treated their businesses as an excuse for not being forced into direct agricultural work.

Among the relatively prosperous landowners, those who took to agricultural innovations are emerging as rich peasants with marketable surpluses, veritable *kulaks*-in-the-making. Middle peasants have started disappearing, by and large, and the poor peasants have started losing their small holdings through distress sales, extremes of fragmentation, acute indebtedness and the rising cost of day-to-day existence, not to speak of exigent expenses such as those enjoined by tradition on births, deaths, marriages, etc. The ranks of the agricultural labourers have been greatly augmented and yet, on account of seasonal migration, there is a sort of labour shortage, resulting in apparent new concessions to attached and casual labourers and even a rise in wages. But neither real wages nor standards of living have improved. The chronically deficit nature of family budgets and the village economy as a whole have ensured continued impoverishment and backwardness.

This is Changel, then. It has seen a community being freshly established. It has experienced the British Raj and its demise. It has been affected by the Permanent Settlement and its unsettling. It has had remote contact with the National Movement and the coming of 'Freedom' and 'Planned Socialist Development.' It has experienced caste and class structures evolving over time. It has sent



out into the world its children and received little in return.

From a distance—as the 20th century draws to a close—Changel seems the archetypal eternal, unchanging village. A closer look reveals that it is by no means eternal and that it has even changed, although the change has been slow and only quantitative.



## *The Problems of Discovery*

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MANY YEARS AFTER Bachcha made his visit to Changel, he published a history of the village. In doing so he had to answer many questions, but many questions remained unanswered.

In writing a history like that, the most obvious of many problems relates to its validity. Does the micro-history represent the complexities of the macro-cosmic reality? Or is it, like a miniature, flat and two-dimensional? Are events and personalities important in the local context at all significant in the broader universe with which most historiography is concerned? To what extent does local history escape being 'exceptional'?

These problems were easily solved in the context of Changel because, to a surprising extent, the way things and people moved in this isolated village bore correspondence to the patterns outlined in '*la grande histoire*'. Imperialism and the nationalist response, the specifics of the mode of production and peasant movements, trade and commerce, caste and religion—almost all the 'big' schematic patterns which emerge from the broad historical exercises of contemporary



scholarship—were all present, albeit in miniaturised form, in this little universe.

The larger-than-life actors who were present in the unfolding of the human drama in India as a whole during this period performed their roles in Changel too. And nature itself presented the backdrop.

The location of Changel, its relative inaccessibility, the fertility of the soil, the changing pattern of its natural ecology, all contributed to its particular history. But nature was not only a passive factor. In more than one way, the upheaval brought by the great earthquake of 1934, dramatically demonstrated the vulnerability of human existence to the elements, a fact further underlined by the various floods and droughts, in which nature was unwittingly assisted by human beings themselves.

Along with nature, state and capital too played almost elemental roles. And, to pun a bit, neither were the elementary aspects of peasant consciousness absent.

The most important feature of the functioning of the state in Changel, as in most Indian villages, was that for the most part it was not physically present. There were few appearances by government functionaries and coercive machinery was conspicuous by its absence. And yet, like Galileo's earth, the state moved. Even in the 18th century, it had a profound influence on the lives of the people. In the 19th, revenue was unhesitatingly rendered unto Caesar—or his representative, in this case appropriately called the Collector. And in the 20th century, particularly after Independence, when the state adopted a discernably higher profile, it was held in awe and veneration. Never once seriously questioned, its schemes and plans formulated far away from Changel's local scene were passively accepted and some were even actively implemented. Obviously, the state in this case was more than the government, the substance infinitely more potent than the symbol. The state in this context was not this or

that part of the machinery of governance but the very energy that powered the machine. And the energy was not only material but also, and even largely, ideological. The very acceptance of its rule served the purposes of the state. Once the rule was passively accepted, the symbols of rule like the *safas* (turbans) of the *dafadar* and *chowkidar* and the *lal pagri* (red turban) of the constable became endowed with more authority than they called for as material objects.

The state was, however, not merely ideological and ethereal, nor was it wholly exogenous. The state was, after all, the rule of property and while superior and larger property outside the village ruled over Changel as a whole, property inside the village too ruled over people. And in spite of occasional friction in the interests of the owners of different kinds and levels of property, an alliance, howsoever unbalanced, existed between the property inside Changel and outside. Thus the state was not only the forces of governance outside the village, which in the ultimate analysis sought to determine how life would be led by the villagers, but also the assertion of the power of property held within the village itself. The village as a whole was 'owned' by those who owned property.

This, however, should not convey that there existed a mechanistic one-to-one correspondence between property and power. Just as property outside the village exercised its rule primarily through its ideological sway, within Changel too, the ideological process of political differentiation through the institution of caste, sexual inequality or religious thought control was more effective than the exercise of mere economic power and even more than brute force. Stability was made almost a moral ideal once it had ensured the interests of the propertied; and after that any attempts to rock the boat, to disturb the equilibrium through socially 'illegitimate' action even on



the part of sections of the propertied, were not particularly appreciated although, ultimately, social balances were upset to conform to emergent patterns of property ownership.

Property itself changed over time. At first, mere ownership of land through a valid or fictitious legal device was enough to guarantee rule. Later 'ownership' and control over labour became much more important. And still later, neither land nor labour were as valuable as control over monetary resources, over cash, with which both, and many other things besides, could be purchased.

The village which from its very 'founding' was based on a cash transaction, became more and more drawn into the vortex of the cash economy as capital changed its nature. There was a progressive monetisation of the village economy from the time when the saltpetre in its earth was sold for cash to when its various commodities and its most important resource, human labour, were translated into money. It is worth noting that the village was at no time outside the realm of capital. Not only did it provide capital with whatever commodities it could in the form of the product of its soil (and the soil itself) and paid cash revenue to finance the needs of imperialism, but in due course it became a new supplier of labour, an integral part of the 'social factory'. As progenitor of the reverse army, it also bore part of the cost of reproduction of labour, making the employment of such labourers in the factories of Calcutta or the fields of Punjab an exceedingly profitable venture for capital. Seasonal employment of such labour on public works too was part of class exploitation by state and capital.

Class existed in the village too, only there it was articulated in the caste system. It would be simplistic, even vulgar, to view class in Changel, as also outside it, as merely based on the differential distribution of wealth. There are other aspects, too, such as religious and social

sanction or ideological domination, and it was this multifaceted phenomenon which divided the population of Changel.

The exercise of class power too varied over time. There was a long period when class relations were expressed primarily in patron-client relations under whose guise the harshness of exploitation was at least given something of a human face. With the increasing monetisation of the village economy along with the increasing commercialisation of agriculture, labour too was converted into a commodity whose exchange was calculated in cash. None of this happened abruptly and one form of exploitation of labour coexisted for long periods with another form. But in the long run, the integration of Changel into the capitalist market through the sale and purchase of different commodities, and through the very circulation of labour as commodity, effectively did away with patronage-clientilism and made serious dents in the *yajmani* system.

Production of commodities itself changed over time and the organisation of production was altered to keep pace. Self-cultivation, sharecropping, different types of tenancy, horticulture, animal husbandry, artisanal production—all these were witnessed in Changel and so were changes, albeit slow and halting, in the instruments of production. The major agricultural tools such as the plough and the sickle have remained basically unaltered, but the organisation of irrigation, the use of different types of cropping patterns and, more recently, of hybridised seeds and chemical fertilisers, have had an important bearing on the organisation of production and the deployment of labour. It is still not possible to say that agriculture in Changel has been so organised that relative surplus value through intensification of the labour process is its general feature, but the production, appropriation and exchange of absolute surplus value are practices that



have long existed. The recent dramatic changes through 'imported' scientific and technological innovations and their impact on productivity will surely reinforce the rule of capital on Changel.

But the rule of capital prevails only to the extent that it is allowed by labour. Capitalism is not all-powerful and autonomous, although it does give the appearance of being so. It is as much conditioned and qualified by labour as vice versa. Thus, it is erroneous to see the working class as inevitably subject and passive. There had been some debate about what is the prime mover in social change: the moral economy of the people or the material economy. This is easily answered. The workers are always active, not only resisting the onslaughts of capital but also carving out their own autonomous existence, however limited and circumscribed by the operation of capital. Nevertheless, workers are workers and their consciousness is of a particular variety, not intrinsic, but resulting from capitalism. This dialectical relationship is too important to forget in any social analysis. And yet there is so much simplification and even arbitrary analytical construction in the social sciences that capital is studied almost without reference to labour and vice versa.

In Changel, if the progress of capital altered the situation of the workers, both the material circumstances and consciousness of the workers in turn qualified and conditioned the forward march of capital. There were hardly any spectacular instances of labour revolt in Changel, but then the growth of capitalism itself was unspectacular, gradual and even insidious. The workers acted in a similar manner and the most dramatic expression of their resistance was when they 'voted with their feet' and migrated. By their sheer absence rather than by any well-organised protest they were able to upset the economic equilibrium and dislocate the established wage and patronage structures. The workers' resistance and

exercise of autonomy was articulated in many other ways too. Delaying tactics, malingering, deliberately spoiling work, etc., the counterpart of industrial sabotage, were frequently resorted to, and verbal abuse and satirical songs were used to 'demoralise' the oppressors. At the same time, both the needs of sheer survival as well as attempts to carve out greater elbow space within the structures of exploitation led them to expand the limits of the natural economy. Field mice, mango kernels, gleanings from fields, etc. became part of their diet and for these they did not have to depend on the owners of land. Religious and social events too, like the *adra* pre-cultivation festivals, were created to extract 'extra' from the propertied, and elements of popular culture were used within the microcosmic setting as much as in the big popular movements.

The equilibrium created through these divergent pulls and pressures has survived in Changel for nearly three centuries. There has been change but it has been excruciatingly slow, and stability and change have both extracted heavy prices.

This was the village which Bachcha had set out to discover and, as he got more and more involved with his quest, he realised that the most effective method of carrying out that exercise—solving the problems of discovery, as it were—was not through poring over written records—which are few in any case—but through field-work with 'participant observation' as the core method. This too, he felt, had its dangers and pitfalls, the creeping in of biases and subjectivity being among them. And yet, as he found out, there was no better mode of discovery than going through with the story of the discovery.

This is Bachcha's story of Changel, a village in north-Bihar, India, from its origins in the 18th century to the present. In the absence of the conventional materials used by historians—that is, plentiful written records—he had



to take recourse to non-conventional sources, like the undocumented oral reconstruction of popular memory. In the process, Changel's apparent conformity to this stereotype of the 'unchanging Indian village' was shown to be illusory; the relevant changes were examined in detail; and the local historiography was set in the context of the general historical trends taking place, outside of the locality but influencing the local scene.

Bachcha found that writing the history of an agrarian village-society posed many problems. On the face of it, such a society was essentially 'unhistoric'. It had witnessed no great events; no cataclysmic happenings had been recorded; no heroic heraldry created. The changes that did take place were gradual and non-traumatic, indeed almost imperceptible. From the inside, time too did not seem to have had a linear meaning. Life moved cyclically according to the crop calendar and was at best traced in generational terms.

In such a society, the conventional tools of the historian seemed to be ineffective. There were few records, not many changes even in artifacts and no 'great men' whose biographies could constitute the stuff of history. There was an oral tradition, but that too was neither factually accurate, nor systematic and certainly not linear. But even such a society had a history. Indeed it may even be said that it had more than one history as perceived by different sections within. The histories were articulated into legends and myths and religious rituals and songs—and even abuse—but they did exist. And it was only the social anthropologists and sociologists who, taking an atemporal cross-section of the people to study under their academic microscopes, could not find the movement in the fourth dimension.

## *The Myth of Creation*

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CHANGEL STILL APPEARS to be the archetypal 'unchanging Indian village'. Located on the border of Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga districts, in the heart of the riverine basin bounded on three sides by the mighty Ganga, Gandak and Kosi rivers, the village seems to have been left out of the forward march of technology and even of history. It has no electricity, no flood protection, no drainage and even the nearest road is four kilometres away. Industrialisation, modernisation and even Sanskritisation seem to have by-passed Changel. A feeble attempt to change the name of the village (from 'Changel' which only has meaning in some archaic tribal language to 'Madhurapur', a more acceptable Sanskrit name given to it in the Survey Settlement Operations in the beginning of the 20th century) seems to have failed. Only the spelling of its name has evolved. It was referred to as 'Changail' and marked rather prominently on a map of 'North Bahar' prepared in the late 18th century as part of the *Bengal Atlas* but today its name is written more phonetically. And yet, Changel has changed.

The village is believed to have been 'founded' in the





beginning of the 18th century by a *kayastha* named Dullah Ram. Legend has it that he was a resident of the nearby Yajuar village, famous for its *brahmins* learned in the *Yajur Veda*. It is interesting that around Changel there are four villages whose names have interesting connotations: Rigaa, Saamair, Athari and Yajuar. These names have obvious Vedic echoes and are possibly derived from the four principal *Vedas*—*Rig*, *Sama*, *Atharva* and *Yajur Veda*. It has been conjectured that these villages could have been centres of Vedic learning in the forests of the Mithila region around Sitamarhi, the birthplace of Sita, which is only a few kilometres as the crow flies from Changel. Janakpur, the capital of Videha or Mithila, now in Nepal, is also not very far and its proximity too would suggest that the region had a tradition of learning. However, if such a culture existed at any time in antiquity, its memory has long gone. In the late 20th century, there is not the slightest evidence of Vedic learning in Rigaa, Saamair or Athari and it is only in Yajuar that there are some Vedic *pundits* still engaged in teaching the *Vedas*. There is no definite information about what the situation was like three hundred years ago; all that is certain is that the area was heavily forested then.

However, some ten kilometres from Changel, there is a high mound on which stands a Chamunda temple dedicated to the Mother Goddess. The mound is referred to locally as a *tila* and some archaeological excavations have been carried out in its vicinity. They have unearthed shards of pottery and other artifacts which indicate continuous habitation of the area for the last thousand years or so.

In any event, in the case of Changel, the tale goes that Dullah Ram was one day passing through a forest, where Changel now stands, on his way back from a village near Muzaffarpur where he worked as a *munshi* (writer-accountant) in a *zamindar's* court. As it became dark,

Dullah Ram decided to spend the night at a disused Bhagwati (Mother Goddess) temple in the jungle rather than cover the three miles which would have taken him home to Yajuar. Temple is probably an inaccurate term for the structure in which Dullah Ram was supposed to have slept. The deity is even now represented by only a red-daubed stone slab with a blurred image in relief located under a banyan tree. This is probably as it was in Dullah Ram's time. Later, a burnt-brick structure with a thatched roof was put up but the stone slab is moved into it only during the monsoon, after an *adra* festival, which is described later.

The story goes that in the night, Dullah Ram dreamt of being told that if he dug a hole near the temple he would obtain a large number of gold coins with which he could purchase the land around the temple, settle his family there and spend his days worshipping the Mother Goddess. According to the story, Dullah Ram did precisely as he had dreamt, and his descendants lived happily ever after.

History, however, is composed of stuff other than dreams and legends about dreams. The facts are much more complex and cruel. It is true that the *panji* (genealogical table maintained among the *karna kayasthas* and *Maithil brahmins* of North Bihar) records that Dullah Ram was the founder of Changel. But, well before his time, the village, and large forest areas around it, were inhabited, albeit sparsely, by the aboriginal population whom neither the great 'Aryan' eastward expansion in the millennium before Christ, nor the various republics and empires—Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim—which came subsequently, were able to affect greatly and if other cultures had existed there, their memory was long gone. However, some of the lands of the original inhabitants had been taken over by force of arms or otherwise by newcomers, and villages like Yajuar had sprung up here



and there. The *pundits* of Yajuar claim that the lands were given to them as revenue-free *inam* (gift) in the time of Akbar Badshah (1555-1605). It is not possible to verify this claim but it is established that Akbar did give many *inam* tenures to learned *Maithil brahmins*. There are records in the Darbhanga Raj Archives now located in the L.N. Mithila University which establish that one Mahesh Thakur received an *inam* tenure from Akbar. His descendants expanded the tenure till, during the Permanent Settlement, the so-called Darbhanga Raj formed the largest *zamindari* in India!

In the bargain, some of the aboriginals had been converted into cultivators and a large number into agricultural labourers. They nominally came within different realms at different times according to who was the overall ruler of the period. But the very remoteness of the area, because of the various rivers and rivulets criss-crossing it, heavy rainfall, regular floods, malaria and dense forests, prevented it from being fully colonised for centuries. The original people continued to live there as forest-dwellers, using tools made from stones picked up from the riverbeds, carrying on essentially food-fathering activities and perhaps some primitive agriculture, living with their own animistic religions and worshipping their own Mother Goddess.

It was in the temple of the Mother Goddess that Dullah Ram slept that night. And it was the aboriginal population that lost control of its land when Changel was 'founded'. Their descendants are today the de-tribalised, 'Backward Caste' landless agricultural labourers, *khatbeys*, who live on the north-western periphery of Changel, nearest to the temple of Bhagwati, the Mother Goddess.

The story regarding the dream about the hidden gold coins can never be verified. However, it is unlikely that the money was dug out of the ground. It is much more possible that Dullah Ram, like many other *munshis* and

*patwaris* (keepers of land records) had helped himself to a part of the fortunes of his feudal employer. What is remarkable is that, unlike many other *kayasthas* who also had similar sources of 'primitive accumulation' open to them, Dullah Ram did not spend the money on food and drink and other things of the 18th-century 'good life' but used it to colonise land. The land which Dullah Ram colonised measured 1,200 acres of arable land with extremely fertile alluvial soil, located in one of the numerous loops of the Lakhandei river, which is one of the many tributaries of the major rivers in the north Bihar plains.

What is also significant is that he 'purchased' at least a part of the land from the *khatbeys* and that there is a land transfer document which records this. While this says something for the lack of physical prowess of Dullah Ram and his kin, as the general practice would have been to simply 'occupy' the land, it also gives the lie to the widely prevalent idea that a formal land market developed only much later. In spite of the fact that Changel was practically an uncultivated tract then, there were settled villages nearby. Even in that period the region must have been fairly densely populated relative to other regions in India. The reports of Buchanan Hamilton on his travel in Bihar in the early years of the 19th century record a fairly large population and intensive agriculture. Thus it is likely that the notion of a land market was prevalent even in the region of which Changel constituted a small enclave. It is also likely that Changel lands were not lying completely uncultivated before their 'colonisation'; the original settlers, the *khatbeys*, were probably shifting cultivation from plot to plot within the broad boundaries of the village. Obviously, the *patwari* in Dullah Ram recognised the importance of documentary evidence of ownership of land and he got the *dastavez* (handwritten land transfer document) recorded. The paper, however,



makes no mention of the price paid to the *khatbeys* for the 1,200 acres which they lost. In any case, through outright 'purchase' or otherwise, a *kayastha* enclave was established and the *panji* was suitably modified to record the descendants of Dullah Ram under the title '*Kothipal sang Changel dera, baas nij* (a loose translation of which would be 'accountants/managers of Changel resident on their own lands').



## The Myth of the Creators

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THE TRANSFER OF land was obviously an important event in the saga of the particular *karna* subcaste of *kayasthas* who colonised Changel and who are to be found mainly in the Mithila region, adjoining areas of Nepal and, curiously, enough, in great numbers in Orissa but hardly anywhere else. They claim descent from the mythical Karna, the fourth son of Chitrugupta, the accountant of the gods and the divine record-keeper who tots up each individual's merits and sins on the basis of which the god of death, Yamaraj, consigns the concerned soul to heaven or hell.

The position of the *kayasthas* in the broad caste hierarchy of India has been a matter of debate and even dispute. They claim to be a twice-born upper caste but they do not quite fit into the four-fold *Varna* categorisation. Different courts of law have been seized of the matter and have variously ruled that they are *kshatriya*, *vaishya* or *shudra*, and some *kayasthas* pleaded before the Privy Council of Britain that they were descended from *brahmins*. The most ingenious story about the *kayasthas* is that when Brahma (God) was engaged in the creation of the universe, *brahmins*



came out of his mouth, *kshatriyas* from his biceps, *vaishyas* from his stomach and *shudras* from his feet, and in the exertion, Brahma was so tired that he perspired from his whole body (*kaya*) and that sweat formed into Chitrugupta, his favourite son and the progenitor of the *kayasthas* who, having come out of the whole body of Brahma rather than any specific part, had the qualities of all the four *varnas*.

It is likely that the *kayasthas* were the result of inter-*varna* reproduction, the archetypal *varnasankar* (cross-breed) who, because they could identify one of their upper-caste parents, could not easily be relegated to the vast numbers of the outcastes. They were not deprived of learning and, being both educated and free of the ritualistic restrictions of orthodox *brahmins*, proved to be useful in the courts of different feudal and largely illiterate landowners and rulers. They acquired importance in the courts and *katchherries* (offices) of the Muslim kings and feudatories too, quickly learning *Farsi* (Persian) and Urdu—most land records in Changel are even today in *Farsi* in the Arabic script—and picking up aspects of Muslim court culture related to food and dress. They took easily to clerical and later, legal occupations, and devised their own literary medium known as *Kaithi* with a vocabulary drawn from Urdu, Persian, Sanskrit and various vernaculars, and a distinct script which is still partly in use among *kayasthas* in various parts of northern India including Changel. An interesting aspect of this Persian learning among *kayasthas* was that it was also a sign of prosperity through pursuing a 'literate profession'. The paradox of having learnt Persian and following a mundane profession was expressed through the wry proverb, '*Padhe Farsi beche tel, dekho yeh kismat ka khel* (It is an irony of fate that a person who has learnt Persian should sell oil).' The *kayasthas* in particular were reluctant to take up occupations that had nothing to do with formal learning.

Among the 12 subcastes of the *kayasthas* who claim

descent from the dozen sons of Chitrugupta, the clan of the *karnas* is among the smallest and, in Bihar, though not in Orissa, not particularly well-to-do. It is interesting to note that the term *karna* or *karan* has been used as the generic name of all *kayasthas* although today it has become one of the 12 subcastes of the *kayastha jati*. The oldest *panjis* of the Maithil (Mithila-based) *karna kayasthas* go back to before the 14th century but there is no documentary evidence as to exactly when. Myth has it, however, that this particular subcaste, which because of its relatively small numbers is better described as a clan, migrated to Mithila from the south, a supposition which would seem to be substantiated by the existence of its members in fairly large numbers in Orissa. Their almost complete absence from the Jharkhand plateau region and from the south-Gangetic plains of Bihar would point towards coastal and riverine migration rather than their having taken a land route. However, since there is not much authoritative research on this community, nothing can be said with certainty. Radha Krishna Chaudhary, a noted historian of Bihar, had been engaged for years in compiling and carrying out systematic research on the *panjis*. Unfortunately, before completing his work, he passed away in 1985. Hopefully, the research can be completed by someone else as otherwise this valuable historical material is likely to be lost for ever, particularly as, faced with the strains of late 20th-century existence, many *panjikars* (record-keepers) are abandoning their ancient profession and trying to eke out their living in other occupations. Indeed, the likelihood of the *panji* system itself collapsing in the not-too-distant future also exists as the *panjikrit* (recorded) groups move away in search of livelihood to areas outside the immediate reach of such *panjikars* as still exist.

Be that as it may, in the 18th century, as in most cases even now, the *karna kayasthas* of Mithila did not hold



much landed property and, in the manner of others of their caste in different parts of India, 'lived by their wits'. Thus, the acquiring of land by this group in Changel, and around the same time in 31 other villages (from which descend the elite *battisgama*—families of 32 villages—among the *karna kayasthas* of today), was an event of great significance.



## *A Rule of Property over Changel*

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AS BACHCHA TOOK the boat that afternoon, and the boatman refused to take money from him, he discovered the real and symbolic meaning of property perhaps for the first time. He had, of course, known property earlier too, but it had been much more inconsequential then. In Changel itself, as a child he had been given a tricycle which was his alone: none else was allowed to use it and it was as much an object of curiosity for the villagers as the bicycle which his grandfather had first brought into Changel half-a-century earlier. That bicycle was an oddity: a machine adapted to the Indian rural conditions. It had a horizontal bar extending from its rear hub and the rider had to first push the bicycle ahead of him, let it gain momentum and then, jumping on the bar hoist himself on the saddle, rather than use the pedal to lift himself up onto the machine. The bicycle was still among the family's goods and chattel but it had, for all practical purposes, become community property. Anyone in the village who cared to ride it was welcome and it had served Changel for decades with messages regarding births and deaths, marriages and partitions being taken on it to neighbours



and relatives. The tricycle did not have many users but it also had neither use nor exchange value and, as such, was 'property' only in the technical sense.

Later in life too, Bachcha had encountered property: schoolbooks in the hostel, stationery, linen and personal clothes. But, even these had rather fuzzy boundaries around them: others could borrow them as required and return was not always guaranteed. Even with cash, in college, Bachcha's experience was somewhat mixed. He used to get his monthly remittance from his parents and from the Indian state which awarded him with a scholarship for being a 'meritorious student' at the beginning of each month. His friends used to receive their pocket-money later in the day. They had therefore devised a communal method of expenditure: whoever had money would pay for the *dosas* and coffee and it would all roughly equal out.

Thus, when Bachcha first encountered the boatman's assertion of his family's ownership of Changel, he was both pleasantly surprised as well as somewhat uneasy. Ownership brought in advantages, of course, such as the free ride on the boat, but it also entailed responsibilities in a feudal set-up. *Noblesse oblige* meant patronage—something quite different from the clear-cut commercial transactions that were ordered by the cash nexus in the cities. And patronage also meant clientilism.

He was brought face to face with this fairly quickly. As he neared his ancestral home, Bachcha found it chock-a-block with people, all manners of characters who had till then only been names, if even that, for him. He also noticed that anxiety was writ large on their faces. It did not take him too long to discover the cause. His grandfather had taken seriously ill after his grandmother's demise. And, while his father had rushed 'home' for the cremation, he had to go back soon since his own daughter was in hospital with a serious ailment. Meanwhile, the

extended funeral rites in progress had cast a deathly air over the village and the grandfather had grown more or less convinced that he too was soon going to meet his Maker. Now, death did not bother the old man; what was his principal concern was that no direct male descendant of his would be available to cremate him when the time came. His illness got compounded by that worry and the presence of hundreds of hangers-on did not make him sanguine.

When Bachcha finally managed to pierce through the crowd and reach the room where his grandfather was lying on his sickbed, the old man did not even notice him for some time. However, after a dozen or so people gently and not so gently prodded him into consciousness, he suddenly realised that his grandson was there to cremate him if he were to die. This thought obviously comforted him no end. His recovery was nothing short of miraculous and, in only a few hours, the old man, reassured regarding his after-life, was quite prepared to face this worldly existence.

That was astounding enough for Bachcha but what was even more wonderful was the way practically the whole village had rallied round. The links of patronage and clientilism—which have an element not only of feudal regard but even of personal affection—are never so manifest in a village than during a crisis, but it took Bachcha years to realise this. He would learn that even if a 'master' beat up his labourers, the norm for him was to send some oil for the victim to rub on his lacerations; and it was perhaps not only the thought of securing labour that prompted this compensatory philanthropy. The village is a forest whose denizens live by their own mysterious rules. It is when those rules break down that cataclysms occur.

Bachcha realised this and more, rather painfully, for his idyllic view of the village life fluctuated with experiences



of cynicism, cunning and outright mean behaviour. And one of the people who, by example, demonstrated the complexity was a character known as 'Mangrauliwali'.

The name itself needs a little explication: women who were married into the village were *never* called by their original names; they were always referred to through the names of their natal villages. Thus, Mangrauliwali had come from Mangrauli; Ratanpurwali from Ratanpur; Keotiwali from Keoti and so on. Women might have in different ways run the affairs of Changel but they never became part of its indigenous population, never considered fit to take part in village councils, never called for their opinion in any forum other than the privacy of their households.

Mangrauliwali was different. She was outspoken, even abusive, and it was said that she was not able to digest a meal without having had a quarrel. Indeed, it was darkly hinted that if she did not get anyone to fight with, she would vent her irascibility on her henpecked husband and her device of provoking that unfortunate soul was simple: she would add extra *noon*; *namak* (salt) to his *dal* (lentils; pulses) and if he protested, a good fight would ensue. This occasioned a saying to describe such a 'shrew': '*Noon da ka lara wali* (One who occasions a fight by sprinkling salt)'.

In any event, Mangrauliwali was not intimidated; abuse flowed from her lips like the Bagmati river in full spate and she was no respecter of village elders. The fact also was that, like other women in the village, it was she rather than her menfolk who took care of most aspects of agriculture, barring actual ploughing since that was taboo for women, and all aspects of food-processing, besides homekeeping, child-rearing and, of course, most of the burden of reproduction of labour through procreation. However, while other women meekly accepted these as their lot in life and prayed so that they may be incarnated

as men in future lives, Mangrauliwali asserted her identity not only *vis-a-vis* her incompetent husband but also Changel's men in general. Thus, when three of her brother-in-law's infant daughters mysteriously died in quick succession, it was she who raised the spectre of female infanticide and threatened to walk alone to the police station ten kilometres away to report the matter if the men of Changel did not have the guts—and organs slightly lower than those—to stop the inhuman practice.

However, Mangrauliwali's actions may not have been entirely altruistic since it was darkly hinted that she did not want her brother-in-law to have male offspring so that her own sons could inherit their uncle's miserable property. Indeed, property and disputes around it were the underlying theme of all quarrels in Changel even in the period when the village uneasily maintained the facade of familial loyalty and caste-based feudal patronage. And, Mangrauliwali had a very clear appreciation of this.

This was demonstrated to Bachcha one evening when he was lying on his *khatia* (cot) under the open sky where millions of stars were glimmering in a firmament untouched by light pollution. Mangrauliwali, who was a grandaunt by village relationship, came and sat next to him and noticed that he was staring at the stars in dull boredom. Mangrauliwali had herself spent years doing the same since it was difficult even for her to provoke someone after nightfall to have an enjoyable quarrel. And, she had noticed through years of observation that the stars did not always stay in the same place: she had in fact in her own unlettered mind charted out their courses by giving them her own familiar names. She had also noticed that in the recent past there had appeared some stars or star-like objects which moved faster than the others and yet they were not meteorites or shooting stars that burnt themselves out. '*Bauaa* (Child),' she asked Bachcha, 'what are those? You have learnt things in



school and you should be able to tell me.' Bachcha wondered about how to explain the satellites—for that is what they were—to this querulous and yet amazingly inquisitive woman. He tried to the best of his ability but was stumped when she asked the next question: 'Why is that if these are owned by some country or the other, other stars are also not private or national property?' The rule of property loomed large over Bachcha's mind that night just as it had loomed over Changel for a long, long time.



## *Maliks and Servants*

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THE ACQUISITION OF 1,200 acres of land by the *karna kayasthas* of Changel led by Dullah Ram and, later, his son, Nihal Das, was only the first step in their becoming village *malecks* (owners, masters) as later Survey Settlement Reports recorded them. They had to found a village community replicating the traditional social divisions of labour, caste hierarchies and ritual practices. Dullah Ram died soon after the land 'purchase' but not before converting himself, in gratitude, from a *Vaishnav* (devotee of Vishnu) to a worshipper of the Mother Goddess—known throughout Indian history in various forms (Durga, Kali, Bhagwati, etc.) and most popularly as Shakti—and of her consort Shiva. An interesting consequence of this is that today, in Changel, the *khatbeys* and the *kayasthas* share the worship of Shakti and Shiva and it is incumbent on every *kayastha* household to have a symbolic representation of Shakti in her local variant, Bhagwati, in the form of a piece of red cloth hanging in the kitchen. The rest of the village is generally *Vaishnav* as are most *karna kayasthas* outside Changel in various parts of Mithila and Orissa.

In Changel itself, the denominational difference proved to be quite significant subsequently and it had its origins in the time of Dullah Ram himself. Having become a



*Shakt* and *Shaivite* (follower of *Shakti* and *Shiva*), Dullah Ram started spending a lot of time in his later years in the company of his co-religionists, the *khatbeys*, drinking toddy and eating meat, or, as his reverent descendants like to say euphemistically, 'worshipping Bhagwati', for the Mother Goddess places no taboos on food and drink and she can be worshipped through the performance of *tantrik* rites. As a result, however, even though he had become a man of property, inhabitants of his former village Yajuar, led by the *pundits* who had curiously inverted their Vedic religion based on sacrifice and feasting into a kind of *sanatan* (orthodox) Hindu *Vaishnavite* puritanism, looked askance at Dullah Ram. He, having taken seriously also to worshipping *Shiva* by consuming *bhang* (cannabis), could not care less.

Incidentally, the hemp plant grows wild in the area around Changel. The consumption of its mildly narcotic leaves is associated with *Shiva*, the pre-Aryan god, and this gives the *Shaivites* a religious justification for consuming the drug in many forms. Among the poor, *bhang* is often taken to temporarily assuage the pangs of hunger. Poverty associated with *bhang* speaks through the proverb by which a person pretending to be rich is taunted: '*Ghar bhuji bhang nai, bibi padey satua* (Although he does not even have *bhang* in his house, his wife farts *sattu* (ground parched grain))'.

Although the consumption of cannabis was not associated with poverty for Dullah Ram, who had become a man of property, it left him incapable of organising his newly acquired estates. It was left to his son, Nihal Das, therefore, to organise a village community.

As the first step in this direction, several families of *karna kayastha* descendants from the female line—sisters and daughters—of Dullah Ram and his paternal ancestors were invited to settle in Changel. They were assigned separate bits of property which are even now known as

*bhaginman* (tribute or respect given to the sons of sisters) but even after more than two-and-a-half centuries (of their coming to Changel), they are still regarded as 'outsiders', 'guests' (*pahun*s) who are referred to relatively politely but have practically no say in the caste affairs of the proper Changel *kayasthas*. The difference which migration to Changel made to such people's lives was that they could add the surname 'Mullick' (a variant of *malik*: master) to their names. This was even as the family of the original *kayastha* settler gradually took on the surname of Das (servant) with reference to the mastery of God Almighty (*Narayan*) who had blessed them with the property.

His kinsmen having come into the village in fairly large numbers, Nihal Das still faced the problem of shortage of labour to organise agriculture and related activities for, according to a practice whose origin or logic is obscure, a *kayastha* could not till the land. In spite of their adaptability however, or perhaps because of it as it enabled them to get alternative occupations, the *kayastha* did not take to agriculture and created a taboo on touching the plough. Thus, when Nihal Das tried to organise agriculture in Changel, he had to look for labour from outside his own kinsmen.

The progressively de-tribalised *khatbeys* were of course one source of labour, principally used in the beginning to clear the land, evidence of which is found even today in the custom that trees in the village are felled only by them and to the accompaniment of particular chants and songs. Similarly, levelling of the ground and making *bunds* and embankments is their job. However, not having been used to intensive cultivation, the *khatbeys* were not particularly skilled in the specialised tasks of agriculture. For that purpose, several members of an intermediate caste, *dhanuks*, were enticed into the village by giving them semi-permanent *harwahi* (ploughing) tenures on bits of



land and other agricultural parcels as *bataidari* (sharecropping) tenants-at-will. There is no evidence of whether in the beginning itself the *dhanuks* were given cash advances or loans too, but, by the beginning of the 20th century, almost all their families were in debt to particular *kayastha* households and functioned almost as bonded labourers to their *maliks* or *girhatths* (*grihasthas*: householders). The men worked in the fields and the women became domestic servants. It is interesting that while this kind of bondage came about among the *dhanuks*, the *khatbeys*, whose position is not much lower in the caste-hierarchy—they too being today classified as 'Other Backward Castes'—remained casual agricultural labourers and were considered not pure enough to enter the homes of the landowners. This was perhaps on account of their relatively late entry into agriculture, their continued food-gathering activities—today they 'hunt' for field-mice and the occasional tortoise—and the fact that they remained on the fringes of Hindu religious practices.

Along with the demand for agricultural labour went the need for specialised rural professionals; barbers, carpenters, blacksmiths, potters and tile-makers, and, surprisingly, washermen. These came into the village on the usual *yajmani* terms and even today get the produce of eight *dhurs* (0.02%) per *bigha* (a land measure; in the area around Changel slightly less than an acre). In recent years there has been some trouble about this payment as attempts have been made to convert the *yajmani* into cash payment (an innovation resented by the recipients in the days of inflation) but the *yajmani* kind of payment continued undisturbed for more than two centuries.

Of these village artisans, the washermen found demand for their services to be dwindling as the *kayasthas* settled down in the village and temporarily ceased to go out looking for jobs as *munshis* and *patwaris*. In due course, therefore, around the middle of the 19th century, some of

the menfolk among the *dhobis* (washermen) migrated out of the village and found employment with some indigo-planting *sahebs* (Britishers) in the neighbouring district of Champaran and even nearer home in the plantation at Gangiya which is only about ten kilometres from Changel. In the third decade of the 20th century, when the British planters were leaving India as synthetic dyes rendered indigo cultivation unprofitable (though the popular myth of conventional as well as 'subalternist' historiography attributes their departure to anti-planter agitations ultimately led by Mahatma Gandhi), one such planter, satisfied by the 'feudal' devotion of the Changel *dhobi* who was employed by him, left him some money before going away. The *dhobi* returned around 1930 to Changel, purchased some land from an indigent *kayastha* family, gave up washing clothes and became a man of landed property. His family still preserves an iron, manufactured by J. Simpson & Co. of Glasgow, a symbol of the connection of inaccessible Changel to the international capitalist market.

This instance of 'upward mobility' led the *dhobis* generally to give up their traditional occupation of washing clothes, a service which was not greatly missed by the rest of the village. There is a stereotype of the *dhobi*, recorded by G.A. Grierson in his monumental work, *Bihar Peasant Life: Being a Discursive Catalogue of the Surroundings of the People of That Province* (first published in 1885; reprinted in 1975 by Cosmo Publications, New Delhi). Grierson says, 'The honesty of the washerman and his tenderness for the clothes committed to his care are not considered of much account in Bihar, and there are numerous proverbs coined at his expense, e.g., "*Dhobi par dhobi base, tab kapra par sabun pare*—No soap ever touches clothes unless many washermen live together (when owing to competition they wash well)." Again, "*Dhobik bap ker kichhu nahi phat*—Nothing belonging to the washerman's father is



ever torn by him" (i.e. those are the only clothes with which he is careful). It is also a wise precaution which, according to Bihari ideas should universally be adopted, to disbelieve a washerman when he says that the clothes are "nearly" ready . . . Again, "*Dhobi, nau darzi, i tinu algarji*—There are three careless people: the washerman, the barber and the tailor".

There are a number of similar proverbs about the unreliable sense of time of other artisanal professionals too; for example, '*Jolha ke aai pai, chamra ke bihan*—When a weaver says the cloth will soon be ready, as he is now brushing it, do not believe him, any more than you believe a shoe-maker who says "The boots will be ready tomorrow". Do such sayings show the lack of comprehension on the part of the peasants, used for centuries to the regularity of the crop calendar, in regard to the shorter and more irregular work-cycles of the artisans?

Of course, in regard to the *dhobis* of Changel, this problem soon ceased with the *dhobis* themselves becoming peasants. Only in 1984-85, when some villagers retired from urban professions and went back to the village, bringing with them both the need for well-cleaned and ironed clothes as well as some instruments of modern laundry (like coal irons), did the Changel *dhobis* remember their traditional occupation and insist on washing their patrons' clothes lest the *yajmani*, paid to them regardless all these years, be stopped.



## *The Market Nexus*

### *(circa 1750 to 1780)*

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BACHCHA WAS INTRIGUED by Changel. Why is it, he asked himself, that this village where so much has happened has not found any mention in records? Is it so insignificant after all?

As he progressed with his academic quest, he kept looking everywhere he could for any mention of the name. Once, near Jhargram in West Bengal, he did come across Changel on a signboard but that obviously referred to another village by the same name. He looked through whatever records that were available but, excepting those that were specific to Changel—like land registration documents or village notes prepared during the Survey Settlement operations—the habitation found no mention whatsoever in the notings of officialdom. His obsession made Bachcha peer at maps. In due course, he looked in vain for Changel in maps in Patna, Calcutta, Delhi, London, Paris, Amsterdam and even in university libraries in the United States of America. He looked for cartographic representations which were as detailed as possible but in those too, except for the most recent ones, he found that it was as if Changel had fallen off the map.



Then one day he had a stroke of luck. A friend invited him home to see a set of old maps that had been lying in the family attic. The maps were part of a set called the *Bengal Atlas* produced by one J.J. Rennels Esq. in 1779, on the orders of Warren Hastings, Governor-General of the Hon'ble East India Company. One map represented 'North Bahar' and there, lo and behold, was marked 'Changail' in roughly the area which the village occupies! Not only that, the map also showed that a fairly well-marked road passed through Changel in a period when other villages and even small towns that became much better known later were not considered significant enough by Mr Rennels to mark on his map.

There had to be a reason for this. It appeared to Bachcha that some commodity, whose importance disappeared later, must have connected Changel then to the market outside and he set out to find out the connection.

Bachcha discovered that Changel was connected in the 18th and early 19th centuries to the international market more than merely symbolically through the *dhobi's* iron made in Glasgow. For, whereas its social organisation seemed to be modelled on the classical 'self-sufficient village community', it had a natural resource for which there was great demand outside. The asset was nothing other than the very soil at the edges of the 1,200 acres which constituted the village and its agricultural land. The soil contained saltpetre (potassium nitrate), a vital ingredient of gunpowder, then widely in use.

One of the reasons why the English, Dutch and French East India Companies sent their merchants and factors—the famous 'founder of Calcutta', Job Charnock among them—up the Ganga from the Bay of Bengal was to reach the banks of the river north of Patna where saltpetre was available. The saltpetre was scraped from the ground and

processed by boiling and sedimentation by a caste of traditional salt-makers known as *noniyas*.

Grierson describes the method of saltpetre manufacture: 'The round vat in which the *noniya* dissolves the saltpetre from the saline earth is *kothi* . . . The mother liquid thus produced flows out through a drain called *panar* . . . It flows into an earthen vessel fixed in the ground, called . . . *parchha* . . . The mother liquid is called *ras* . . . After the saltpetre has been deposited, the refuse liquid from which salt can be reduced is called *pachhari* . . . Over the round vat are placed bamboo rafters, which are called *koro* . . . These are supported on bricks, *inta*, and over them is spread straw, called *chhaja* . . . The mother liquid is boiled in a large iron pan . . . The pot for cooling the liquid is called *taula* . . . *Jarua Sora* is saltpetre prepared by boiling; *Abi Sora* is saltpetre prepared by evaporation by the sun's rays; and *Kalmi Sora* is refined saltpetre'.

The *noniyas* had reached Changel too, where they settled on the southern and western peripheries of the village proper and indulged in their trade. The processed saltpetre was taken from Changel by covered bullock carts, called *shampany garis* (Company carts), and the material was ultimately traded at Hajipur on the northern bank of the Ganga, almost a hundred kilometres away from Changel. The resultant relative prosperity of the *noniyas* led to their building the first burnt-brick pucca houses in the village and the importance of this natural resource was perhaps responsible for the interest that J.J. Rennels, Esq. took in remote Changel.

However, the 'upstart' status of the *noniyas* was much resented by the *kayasthas* who even today disdainfully refer to those among the lower castes who are upwardly mobile in the economic sense as having *noniya-bakkal* (*noniya*-trader) characteristics, something to be looked down upon by the poorer but self-consciously upper-



caste landowners. In recent years, with the political consciousness of caste having increased on account of what is known as the 'Mandalisation process', the *noniyas* too have discovered a counter-consciousness to the upper caste *kayasthas* and *brahmins*: they refer to themselves proudly as 'Buckbutt' (Backward).

This, however, is a phenomenon of the late 20th century. In 18th-century Changel, the *noniyas* could not benefit much from the international competition among buyers of their produce because, by the middle of the 18th century, the English East India Company established its supremacy over the others and indeed acquired a kind of political suzerainty over the Bengal *suba* of which Bihar was then a part. The English having become monopsonists in this regard, the price of saltpetre fell, with disastrous results for Changel's links with the outside world. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that in history books one of the causes of the defeat of the French in the Anglo-French struggle for supremacy in India and in Europe was their lack of access to saltpetre and, hence, shortage of gunpowder. Even Napoleon seems to have suffered on this account. The people of Changel are, by and large, not aware of this historical accident, but if they knew, they could well say that the battle of Waterloo may have been won on the playing fields of Eton but England's victory was at least partly due to French lack of control over the saltpetre *chours* (uncultivated lands) of unknown Changel! It is on account of the *chours* being impregnated with salt that their soil is referred to even to this date as *nonchaharah ussar*.

In the 19th century, chemists—among them Alfred Nobel, famous for the Peace Prize which he instituted later—found other ways of making gunpowder and explosives without recourse to the use of saltpetre. And the tenuous contact which Changel, along with the rest of

north Bihar, had established with international capitalist markets in this respect was lost. The village dropped off the maps and went back to an agriculture-based isolation.





# God and Mammon

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THE AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITY of Changel, however, could not settle down properly without the services of a priest. Thus, Nihal Das tried his best to persuade a learned *brahmin* from Yajuar village to migrate from there to Changel along with his family. As an inducement, the family was offered a one-*pice* share in the village (one-fourth of one *anna* or 1/64th of a rupee, that is, one-and-a-half per cent, which was approximately 20 *bighas* of the total 1,200 acres of the cultivable lands of the village) in addition to a *pro rata* share of any other revenues accruing to the village, and, of course, the usual *purohiti* (fees for performing priestly functions). The *pandit*, finding this position more attractive than learning, reciting and teaching the *Yajur Veda* by rote in his parent village, Yajuar, accepted the offer and shifted to Changel circa 1750, as his *panji* records.

Being ritually prohibited from carrying out cultivation, the *pandit's* family turned most of the 20 *bighas* assigned to him at the eastern end of the village into mango orchards. In due course, though much, much later, the growing of mangoes proved to be an extremely profitable proposition in the late 20th century when urban and West Asian demand for the fruit grew.

The *pandit's* family also staked its claim to fish from

the three ponds (*pokhairs*) which were dug around the village. Not satisfied with the amount of fish the family received (though meat and eggs and even onions and garlic were taboo for them), the *pandit* had a separate pond dug for the exclusive use of his family. The pond is still known as *panditjik pokhair* (the *pandit's* pond) although it has been allowed to dry up and the land is now used for agriculture rather than pisciculture. At its south-eastern corner stands a disused Krishna temple, now visited mostly by young children with diarrhoea who, especially during the monsoon, cannot go far from the village to relieve themselves.

Around the temple hangs a tale. As Bachcha was repeatedly informed during his researches into Changel's evolution, the religious persuasion of Dullah Ram changed from *Vaishnavism* to *Shakt-Shaivism* and it made little difference to anyone as long as it was confined to his personal faith. However, when his son Nihal Das tried to persuade a priest from Yajuar to come and settle in Changel, the *Vedic* orientation of the *brahmins* asserted itself in aggressive rejection of the pre-*Vedic* Shakti-Shiva cult. As a precondition to coming to Changel, they insisted on the adoption by Nihal Das of *Vaishnavism*, which is historically post-*Vedic* but nevertheless acceptable, and demanded the worship of Vishnu in his incarnated form of either Ram or Krishna.

There was a problem, though, in this: the worship of Ram is not popular in Mithila because he is considered a son-in-law of the region by virtue of having married the *Maithil* girl Sita Janaki, daughter of King Videha. Besides, even as a son-in-law, Ram was not considered to have been particularly good as marriage to him resulted in Sita suffering greatly, a belief which even today makes people hesitate in selecting *paehhimaha* grooms (originating from the region to the west of Mithila, like Ram who is supposed to have been from the Ayodhya, Kosala, region)



for Maithil brides. Thus, the worship of Ram was found unacceptable and a compromise was arrived at whereby a Krishna temple was constructed for the *brahmin* family. Nominal allegiance to *Vaishnavism* was proclaimed by many *kayasthas* who adopted the surname 'Narayan Das' (servant of Vishnu).

In actual fact, the majority of the village population continued Shakti-Shiva worship in the old temple in the north-western *khatbey* corner of the village known as *maliabari* (the gardeners' plot) or in the symbolic representation of Bhagwati in their own kitchens. The formal worshippers of Shakti/Bhagwati, the *pujaris*, were drawn from among the lower-caste people some of whom later claimed to be *malis* (gardeners) as they tended the garden of the Goddess and practised elements of magic and self-flagellation as part of the ritual of worship.

An interesting aspect of the worship of the Mother Goddess is the ritual expected of the chief worshipper, who works himself into a trance and dances frantically before the idol. In order to dance, however, the worshipper has to wear a woman's skirt and shoulder cloth, of a design not known in Changel, and not worn by the village women. 'Then I am the Goddess!' says he; the emphatic claim has to be substantiated during the dance by an ordeal, usually consisting of picking up red-hot embers in his bare hands. Such is the ecstasy of the priest that he does not feel the heat, nor is any mark left on his skin thereafter; should the hand burn, it would be proof that the Goddess had rejected the priest or the rite. D.D. Kosambi, who describes an almost identical ritual among the Pardhis near Pune (in his *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay: Popular, 1956, pp.26-7), holds that, 'Clearly, the ceremonial, whose avowed purpose is increase of game and food, was taken over by the men from the women, though the clans are now patriarchal like the surrounding society'. In Changel, for worshipping

Bhagwati, the *khatbeys* were given one sumptuous meal of *kheer-puri-aam* (sweetened rice cooked in milk, *puris* and mangoes) on the first day of the *adra nakshatra* (beginning of the monsoon) which is obviously also a secular event, marking the beginning of intensive labour in paddy transplantation.

The importance of the *adra nakshatra* in the harvest calendar of the paddy-cultivating region is testified by numerous folk sayings. This particular asterism, which is also known as *aradara*, is the beginning of the sowing and transplanting of the winter (*aghani*) crop; hence, the time is linked with the rains. Some popular rhymes regarding this season are:

*Mirgsira tabay Rohini labay Ardara je budbuday  
Kahay Dhak sunu Bhillari, kutta bhat na khay*

'If Mirgsira is hot, Rohini rains, and Adra gives a few drops,' saith Dhak, the repository of folk wisdom, to his disciple, 'O Bhillari, rice will be so plentiful that even dogs will turn up their noses at it.'

*Adra mans je boe sathi  
Dukh ke mar nikala lathi*

'If you sow sixty-day rice in Adra, you strike distress with a club and drive it away.'

*Aadi na barse adra, hast na barse nidan  
Kahay Dhak sun Bhillari bhae Kisan pisan*

'If Adra does not rain at its commencement, and Hathiya at its end,' saith Dhak, 'hear, O Bhillari, the cultivator is crushed.'

And, conversely,

*Charhat barse aradara, utrat barse hast  
Kateko raja danre, rahe anand girhast*



'If it rains when *Adra* commences and when *Hathiya* is ending, no matter how much rent may be demanded by the king, the householder is still happy.'

During this vital agricultural period, therefore, while the monsoon was paramount in importance; it was also important to keep labour happy. Hence they were given the feast. This was also perhaps because it was necessary to appease labour in Changel which, being lately settled, had not perfected enough coercive mechanisms to extract work from labourers who were known as *rar jati* or *solkanh*; in more settled parts of Bihar, force rather than food was used to make the labourers work. The general caste stereotype was represented by the proverb:

*Kaeth kichhu lenen delen, brahman khiyaulen,  
Dhan pan piyaule, au rar jati latiaulen*

'A *kayastha* does what you want only on payment, a *brahmin* on being fed, paddy and betel on being watered, but a low-caste person on being kicked!'

Given Changel's specific situation, this prescription could work for the first three; for the low-caste labourers, other, subtler, methods of management had to be used! The *khatbeys* were, therefore, basically converted into casual agricultural labourers. They were employed for transplantation, harvesting and threshing periods on daily wages known as *boin* (literally derived from the word for 'planting') which has more or less been fixed at one-a-half *seers* (about 700 grams) of coarse grain (barley, gram, *khesari* pulses, *ragi*, and later maize) or occasionally paddy and *nasta* or *jalkhai* (literally, drinking water, breakfast) consisting of one large *roti* usually made of *ragi* (*marua*) with ground *tisi* (linseed) paste.

In the summer months, the *khatbeys* were allotted minuscule plots to cultivate *ragi* laboriously on a

sharecropping basis. *Ragi*, the humble millet, was derided by the upper castes. For example, there is a saying:

*Kodo marua ann nahin  
Jolha Dhuniya jan nahin*

'*Kodo* (another humble millet) and *marua* (*ragi*) are not food-grains (being despised as poor people's food), just as weavers and cotton-carders can never be (good) agricultural labourers.'

However, during the lean summer months, when very little other food was available to the poor, these millets were invaluable to them and their sayings represented a completely different point of view. For example:

*Jab maruaa ke gachhi bhel  
Dhiya puta suikh macchi. bhel  
Jab marua mein bal bhel  
Dhiya puta ke gal bhel*

'When the *marua* began to sprout, the children dried up like flies (that is, their food had been used for seed-grain); but when the *marua* came into ear, the children got (fat) cheeks.'

Even in the late 20th century, Bachcha noted with interest that the share of the landowner in the *ragi* crop was not used for his own consumption but was for disbursement as wages.

For most of the year, the agricultural labourers were left to their own devices to forage for food ranging from fish or shells from the ponds, mangoes and their kernels, field mice, whatever other edible animals were extant and toddy from the palm trees. Some children of the *khatbeys* were employed on a semi-permanent basis for which, till the 1950s, they received just one meal a day.

The condition of the *dhanuks* and *noniyas*, who joined



the agricultural labour force after the saltpetre trade ended, was better than that of the *khatbeys*. Being recognised agriculturists, some of them obtained semi-permanent employment. Others acquired land through *batai* (sharecropping). There were, of course, casual agricultural labourers among them, but most *dhanuk* families were divided up so that nuclear units among them were 'attached' to respective *grihasthas*, the men becoming *jiratiyas* (cultivation supervisors on owned—*jirat*—lands), the women working as domestic servants and the children becoming *khawas* (general help) workers. In many cases, the *jiratiyas* were labourers who received land rent-free and worked for the landowner without remuneration in the agricultural season. *Khawas* means a male house servant. A proverb which alludes to him is '*Chorak sang chor, pahruk sang khawas* (With other thieves he is a thief, but in the presence of the watchman he is simply a servant)', the implication being that you cannot really trust a *khawas*.

In spite of this picture, the fact is that at least in Changel, strong personal bonds developed between particular 'masters' and their *khawas*, to the extent that in one case, when one such *malik* went to jail during the Non-Cooperation Movement against the British Raj, his *khawas* insisted on going along with him and also courted arrest! Feudal loyalties thus developed among the *dhanuks* towards their respective householders and the relationship lasted in this fashion for nearly 200 years till recent economic and social forces started to tear them asunder.



## *Flies in the Ointment*

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AS BACHCHA GREW older and read theories about social stratification and economic differentiation in his college textbooks and elsewhere, he found a major mismatch between those and the picture of the idyllic village community that had been drawn of Changel by those who re-created its past from hazy memory. That made him uneasy. Although by then he was nearing the completion of his second decade of existence, he was naive enough, and perhaps perceptive enough too, to believe that reality must match theory. Thus, he felt, things must have been different in Changel from the picture of familial harmony that was painted for him.

It was not easy for him, however, to peer into the family cupboards for ancient skeletons. While conflicts were apparent enough in the village whenever he visited it, there was a sudden lack of recall about old quarrels. His persistence in asking about these was often answered by the final statement: '*Puran sara par har nai chalai chhai* (The cremation grounds of the ancestors is never ploughed)'.

Bachcha found this strange since he observed that there were fights taking place all the time over property



and ancestors were recalled freely in that context. In fact, abuse was often based on defiling the ancestral name, but, paradoxically, it was combined with reverence for ancestors and familial solidarity. He discovered that, despite these, there were indeed skeletons which rattled about in ancient cupboards and related to the tensions that had inevitably erupted in Changel as the village encountered the market and the state.

The first economic and political strain was felt by the *kayasthas*. By the end of the life of Nihal Das, circa 1770, the village community had got fairly stabilised in Changel. There were twelve *kayastha* households from among his sons and his brothers' sons who were co-sharers in the village property. There were three *bhaginmaan* (sisters') families who were given separate bits of property. The *brahmin* family had settled down and accepted the religious heterodoxy to an extent, the priest having blessed Nihal Das and his successors with the prospect of '*ek lakh putra, sawa lakh nati* (a hundred thousand sons and a hundred and twenty-five thousand grandsons') and himself having procreated a dozen sons who survived the high infant morality of that period. The *khatbeys* had been deprived of their land peacefully. The *dhanuks* and *noniyas* provided agricultural and other labour. Artisans had adopted the *yajmani* system for making their services available. And the fertility of the soil ensured the stability of food supply.

The principle produce was paddy but other grains like *marua*, *moong* and *khesari* pulses, linseed, etc. were also grown. *Khesari* (*Lathyrus Sativa*) has poisonous properties and is unwholesome for human beings. However, it was, and still is, cultivated in large tracts in Changel and elsewhere to be used as wages for labourers as well as feeding cattle (the two being almost equated). Bullocks eat *khesari* greedily, illustrated, for example, in the saying—

*Turuk tari, bail khesari*  
*Baman aam, kayath kaam*

'Toddy is necessary for the happiness of a Mussulman (interestingly referred to as a Turk), *khesari* for a bullock's well-being, mango for a *brahmin's* satisfaction and employment for a *kayastha's* maintenance.

Changel does not illustrate the supposed absolute need of Muslims for toddy (although the Muslim inhabitants of neighbouring Neudu hamlet do consume toddy from the palm trees, an activity in which they are surreptitiously joined by many others, particularly *noniyas* and *kayasthas*), but the partiality of bullocks for *khesari* persists. Bachcha had already come across mango cultivation (profitable in the long run) by the *brahmins*; their fondness for the fruit is perhaps aided by the custom that the first fruits of the season which ripen during the *rohini nakshatra* and are known as *rohinia aam* are customarily gifted to the priests as *bisun ang* (God's—and hence God's priests'—share)! The *kayasthas* do depend in large measure on outside employment for their livelihood.

Salt was locally produced and the one major commodity for which the village depended on outsiders—cloth—was readily available from the handloom weavers of Simri Bakhtiyapur, a neighbouring village, eight kilometres away along a dirt track. The weavers were mainly Muslims and were known as *jolahas* or *momins* unlike the Hindu weavers in other parts of Bihar who were known as *tatmas* or *tantis*. The weavers were the most specialised professional artisans in rural society and were therefore most alienated from agriculture. The peasants found this highly amusing and there are any number of jokes about the *jolahas'* lack of agricultural knowledge which is extended to represent general stupidity. The fact that, being non-agriculturists and commodity-producers, the *jolahas* preferred cash transactions rather than the *yajmani* system of payment would also have appeared odd to peasants in a period before the cash nexus became generalised.



However, the myth of the stupid *jolaha* persists in many areas even till today. More than a century ago (to be precise, on 27 January 1880), Grierson recorded in his diary as follows: 'The Mussulman weaver or *jolha* (*jolaha*) is the proverbial fool of Hindu stories and proverbs. He swims in the moonlight across fields of flowering linseed, thinking the blue colour to be caused by water. He hears his family priest reading the *Quran*, and bursts into tears to the gratification of the reader. When pressed to tell what part affected him most, he says it was not that, but the wagging beard of the old gentleman which so reminded him of a pet goat which had died. When forming one of a company of twelve, he tries to count them and finding himself missing, wants to perform his own funeral obsequies. He finds the rear peg of a plough, and wants to set up farming on the strength of it. He gets into a boat at night, and forgets to pull up the anchor. After rowing till dawn he finds himself where he started, and concludes that the only explanation is that his native village could not bear to lose him, and had followed him. If there are eight weavers and nine *hukkas*, they fight for the odd one. Once upon a time a crow carried off to the roof of the house some bread which a weaver had given his child; before giving the child any more he took the precaution of removing the ladder. Like the English fool, he always gets unmerited blows. For instance, he once went to see a ram-fight and got butted himself. As the saying runs:

*Karigah chhar tamasa jay*

*Nahak chot jolaha khay*

'He left his loom to see the fun, and for no reason got a bruising.' '

The non-agricultural character of the *jolaha* (and hence his seeming peculiarity in the eyes of the general peasantry) has also been the subject of many sayings. For example,

'*Jolha janathi jau katai*—Does a weaver know how to cut barley?'—refers to a story about a weaver who, unable to pay his debt, was sent to cut barley by his creditor, who thought to repay himself in this way. But instead of reaping, the stupid fellow kept trying to untwist the tangled barley stems (as presumably he would disentangle thread). Other proverbs, also indicating the *jolaha's* unfamiliarity with what was considered commonplace by the peasants are: '*Kauwa chahal baas ka, jolha chahal ghas ka*—The weaver goes out to cut grass (at sunset) when even the crows go home;' '*Jolha bhutiailah tisi khet*—The weaver lost his way in the linseed field,'—an allusion to the swimming exploit which Grierson had recorded. The weaver's wife bears an equally bad character in the saying, '*Bahsali jolhini bapak darhi noche*—A wilful weaver's wife will pull her own father's beard.'

Bachcha found that all these sayings and many more of the same type were current in Changel (their usage having declined only in the last few years). He therefore concluded that it would indicate that the Changel villagers too found the weavers of Simri Bakhtiarapur different in some respect from other people they had to deal with. Nevertheless, regardless of these ethnological considerations, the cloth trade flourished for many years and there was little viciousness in the portrayal of the weavers as stupid, the sayings representing nothing more than good-natured bantering about a set of people whose means of livelihood were different from those of the bulk of the rural population.

In any event, even without reference to the 'division of labour' which characterised the village economy, there is no record to show that there was any superior village right which was held by anyone from outside the village. This was despite the fact that there were fairly big *zamindars* in the area at the time and the extensive landlordism of the *Maithil brahmin* Darbhanga Raj was already being



consolidated politically; that Bihar suba was under Alivardi Khan and later, Siraj-ud-daulah, who lost the battle of Plassey in 1775; and that there had been a series of Mughal governors who had ruled over Tirhut, where Changel is located, and who founded trading and administrative centres such as Muzaffarpur.

By formal reckoning, therefore, Changel too was part of the wider polity and was subject to administrative and revenue arrangements decreed from time to time, but the very remoteness of the village from centres of power and its particular inaccessibility—on account of the Lakhandei river to its south, the land depression called Pahal, which became flooded and remained uncrossable for nearly half of every year, on its west, large unpopulated *chours* and a series of similar villages protected by the meandering Bagmati to its east—kept Changel insulated till after the death of Nihal Das. It was not possible for Bachcha to establish when the road marked on the map drawn by J.J. Rennels, Esq. disappeared, but disappear it did and for years Changel's links with the outside world remained tenuous.



## Tradition and Religion

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EVEN AS THE story of Changel unfolded layer by layer in front of his own eyes, Bachcha grew up. The innocence of his childhood and the *naivete* of his callow youth gave way to a more profound scepticism which grew at times even into cynicism. He read ponderous tomes on sociology: accounts of remembered villages, anthropology bordering on zoology—descriptions of 'the other', as it were, always from behind the right side of the bars of the cage—romantic colonialist and nationalist history and even its subaltern counterpart, pictures of large landscapes with monuments dotting them, and, at best, a few peasants occasionally added to satisfy the elite's guilt at its own arcane discourse. He also heard clichés about composite culture, unity in diversity and theories of popular culture. He wondered whether Changel was radically different from the universe of these scholarly exercises or whether they had somehow missed the point of its existence and evolution.

He saw in Changel different kinds of stupidity and superstitions, various hyocrisies and abuses; but he also saw a vitality which was almost inexplicable.



miserable conditions of life that prevailed there.

Almost his first encounter with sex, for instance, was when going to the fields to relieve himself one night, he surprised a couple who emerged dishevelled from the dense jute plants. He did not quite grasp then what they had been doing but the next day there was a hullabaloo in the village, particularly since the man was found to have been a *kayastha* and the woman a *brahmin*. Inter-caste liaisons were apparently all right only as long as they did not become public; on their being exposed, caste councils met to decide on the punishment for the guilty. It goes without saying that the man got off with a lighter punishment than the woman.

Bachcha was intrigued by a couple who lived right in the fields, well outside the village proper. The man was said to be a *sonar* (goldsmith) by caste and a *Kabir-panthi* (follower of the great syncretic thinker Kabir) and the woman was considered unmentionable. There was much sniggering about them and it was hinted that they had been excommunicated and exiled from the village for illegitimate (or inter-caste) relations. The concept of 'living together' had not reached Changel, but 'living in sin' was very much a thing the villagers were bothered about. On the odd occasion that the woman in question had to pass through the village, she was the butt of merciless teasing. The blacksmith-cum-carpenter *hulas*, in particular, used to take great pleasure in loudly proclaiming, with accompanying lewd gestures, a popular proverb: '*Sau sonar ke, ta ek lohar ke* (A hundred strokes of the goldsmith is matched by one of the blacksmith)'. The woman could only meekly mutter in protest: '*Garib ke bahu sab ke bhaujai* (The poor man's wife is everybody's sister-in-law, 'referring to the sexually loaded relationship between women and the younger brothers of their husbands).

There were other liaisons and dalliances too but they were generally hushed up. However, a major scandal did

break out once. Much had been hoped from a bright young *kayastha* boy who had done well in his studies. However, he could not get an adequate job after finishing his education. Now, for a *kayastha* not to get a job—'service' or *naukari* being considered to be the ordained destiny of the caste—was traumatic. The fact that his family had sufficient land and income from it, and indeed that it would have benefited enormously from his participation in agriculture, was discounted. In any event, the young man had a kind of a mental breakdown since his established worldview and his place in the order of things was disrupted. The problem was compounded by the fact that he was named Radheyshyam (one of the many names of the god Krishna) and he took the name seriously. He therefore took to sitting on an *imli* (tamarind) tree by the pond known as *panditjik pokhair*—since the legendary *kadamba* tree on which Krishna sat was not available in Changel—and playing his flute. This would have been considered harmless enough but for the fact that while Radheyshyam imagined himself to be Krishna, he also concluded that all the women who came to bathe in the pond were *gopis* (the milkmaids who were in love with Krishna). The comi-tragedy was compounded by some of the gullible women either believing this incarnation theory advanced by him or being simply attracted to this rather handsome and eligible young man.

The daytime activities were shocking enough for the rest of the village but when the scene of activities shifted to the abandoned Krishna temple to the far end of the pond, the matter became totally scandalous. Radheyshyam was packed off from the village to a cousin in Nepal; some of the aspirant *gopis* were speedily married off; others, not so fortunate, became the butt of ridicule, so much so that a few of them had no option but to take to religion seriously. They travelled for long every year on pilgrimage; performed long hours of *puja* in their homes,



waited devoutly on the deities in the different temples of the village and generally occupied themselves in lives of piety.

It is another matter that some of these latter women had to take recourse to a rather unconventional profession. Since there was a taboo on their touching the plough and since several of them were upper-caste women who could not even go to the fields to supervise agricultural operations, they took to the next best economic activity: money-lending. They lent out whatever capital that they could muster at usurious rates of interest, generally twelve per cent per month compounded.

Bachcha, who got to know these facts of life, was surprised only at one aspect of these tales: he wondered how women who were practically illiterate managed not only to do complicated calculations regarding compound interest but also never lost track of their monies. In their case, devotion to God was shared with almost equal fanaticism about Mammon.



## *The Raj of Lamindars and Others*

*(circa 1780 to 1880)*

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MONEY AND MONEY-LENDING were not the only features that connected Changel to the outside world. Such was the magnitude of change taking place in India at the time that even isolated, insulated Changel could not remain untouched. After their victory in Plassey, the British were inexorably moving inland from Bengal in search of trade, revenue and, 'in a fit of absent-mindedness', an empire. The battle of Buxar in Bihar in 1763 really marked the beginning of the British Raj for it was after their victory in that battle that the *Diwani* of Bengal (which included Bihar) was formally given to them.

Much has been written of the subsequent rapacity of the British and their Indian agents who bled the countryside in search of ever-increasing revenue sources. Temporary *thikadari* (contractual) revenue-collection arrangements, arbitrary cesses, aggressive monopolistic and monopsonistic trade, de-industrialisation, poverty,



famine, etc. which were the consequences of the formal assumption of power by the British, have been adequately covered by historical scholars. Suffice it for the present to record that even Changel, isolated as it was, felt the impact and, in 1793, when the British proclaimed the Permanent *zamindari* Settlement, Changel, for the first time, became totally integrated into the political-economic system of the British Raj.

It is not known if any kind of survey of land rights was carried out by the administration of Changel at that time, but a complicated land system and revenue arrangement emerged as a result of the Permanent Settlement. For the most part, the village was recognised as *khudkast jirat* (self-owned and self-cultivated land) of the collateral branches of the family of Nihal Das. Revenue was assessed on the village as a whole and had to be paid directly to the Collector at Muzaffarpur. The members of the paternal line of the *kayasthas* were designated village *malecks* (owners) but to the senior branch, direct descendants of Nihal Das, was given the title of *zamindar* of lands given to the *bhaginmaan* (sisters') branch, the priests and some lands on the periphery of Changel lying in the revenue *mauza* (village) of neighbouring Uphrauli. Thus, the senior branch of Nihal Das' family also became petty *zamindars*, collecting, on behalf of the Raj, a revenue of 160 rupees and six annas (Rs. 160.37) *per annum* from lands other than their own. Perhaps for helping the British in arriving at this land-revenue settlement, the eldest son of Nihal Das, also a *patwari* who was sharp enough to pick up the nuances and complications of the various legal and regulatory aspects of the Permanent Settlement, was given for himself and his eldest son in perpetuity the *khitab* (honorific title) of *kanungo* (learned in the laws) and a more material prize of approximately a hundred acres of revenue-free *nankar* land on the south-eastern end of the village where its boundaries met those of neighbouring

Bishanpur. Needless to say, the Permanent Settlement made no mention of any lower-caste *bataidari* tenants and thus the *dhanuks* and *noniyas* were legally reduced to being tenants-at-will.

For the first few years, the *kayasthas* of Changel did not seem to have suffered greatly on account of the Permanent Settlement. True, the Settlement had brought about some differentiation in terms of legal position among them and they also had to sell grain to raise the cash for paying the assessed village revenue in addition to the revenue they collected as *zamindars*. But, on the whole they were still immune to the operation of other aspects of the machinery of the state and capital. The nearest *thana* (police-station) was set up in Katra, more than ten kilometres away and extremely rarely did a state functionary of any rank need to visit the village. The markets were quite far away and the commerce of the village was essentially carried out through *paikars* (itinerant traders) who came there occasionally. Formally and legally recognised as village proprietors, at least the *kayasthas* of Changel, or most of them barring the *bhaginmaan* households, constituted a close and interdependent clan, with complete trust in the community feeling of their individual members. Ironically, it was this trust which resulted in the first major fissure in Changel's people.

An aspect of the Permanent Settlement which, like other regions subjected to it, also affected Changel almost catastrophically in the 1850s, related to the fact that, under the Settlement, individual proprietorship rather than community ownership had become the rule of the day. The rule of property under the Raj also implied the centrality of the individual in social and economic organisation. At the same time, the demand for cash rents had intensified the commodity market and various regulations laying down penalties for non-payment of the *jumma* (cash revenue) by certain fixed dates and times had



activated even the land market. For many decades Changel survived these forces but finally, in the time of the great-grandson of Nihal Das, around the middle of the 19th century, they caught up with Changel. Until that time, the *kayastha* landowners of the village as a whole collected the revenue to be paid and the amount was entrusted to one person (generally one Brijbhushan Das who was known for his learning and wordly wisdom as he was employed as the *munshi* in a large *zamindari* at Pupri near the Nepal border) and that person, designated as the village *mukhtar* or *mokhtear* (pleader), went to the Collectorate at Muzaffarpur and paid the revenue into the government treasury. It is not for nothing that the highest district official of the British Raj, the personification as it were of the *mai-baap sarkar* (a 'benevolent' government which was supposed to act as the mother and father of the people) was known as the Collector. The collection and payment of revenue were important tasks because, under the 'Sunset Law', if the revenue was not paid by the evening of the designated date, the village proprietorship was liable to be auctioned. It was provided that if the revenue could not be paid into the treasury for some reason, it could even be tied into a piece of cloth marked with the relevant details and thrown into the Collector's compound by sunset of the given date and receipt for it could be obtained on the following day. However, if the revenue payment was delayed, under the stringent *Pancham* and *Haftam* (5th and 7th) Regulations enacted in the 19th century, there was no escape for the concerned proprietorship from auction.

This provision of summary auction may appear strange in the context of the 'due process of law' otherwise followed by the British. It must be remembered however that, by the middle of the 19th century, the British had realised the 'mistake' they had made in the Revenue Settlement in the eastern region by tying up the revenue

demand at the levels obtaining in the late 18th century in perpetuity under the terms of the Permanent Settlement. Having learnt from that experience, the British made only Temporary Settlement in the *ryotwari* areas and seized the opportunity of enhancing revenue through summary auction of *zamindari* estates in the Bengal Presidency too. Other administrative and legal processes may have been dilatory, but application of the 'Sunset Law' was swift and Changel felt the full brunt of the power of that law.

In 1853, as in other years, Brijbhushan Das took the revenue of Changel to pay it at Muzaffarpur. There he was approached by a representative of the Nawab of Patna, a very important *zamindar* of Bihar, who put an enticing proposition to him. It was explained to him that rather than being a co-sharer in a village, it would be much better for Brijbhushan Das personally to become an individual proprietor. The process leading towards that end could be easily arranged by his failing to pay the village revenue in time; the village being auctioned the next day; it being bought by the Nawab of Patna and the latter transferring an eight *anna* (50 per cent) share to Brijbhushan Das individually. Brijbhushan Das succumbed to the temptation and did not deposit the revenue in the treasury. Later in the night though, suffering from pangs of conscience, he tied up the bundle and threw it into the Collectorate. Thus a legal complication was created. When the revenue accounts were initially totalled, it was found that Changel had defaulted and it was auctioned and purchased by the Nawab of Patna who, true to his word, transferred 50 per cent of the ownership to the individual name of Brijbhushan Das. Later, more accurate accounting resulted in a revenue receipt being issued to the co-sharers of Changel as a whole.

When the people of Changel got to know of what had happened, there was little that they could do to the Nawab of Patna but they took out their ire on Brijbhushan



Das. A folk song records that every woman in the village went to him and broke a used earthen cooking pot (*taula*) on his head. As adequate documentary evidence of this complicated transaction is lacking, it is not possible to verify all aspects of the story, some parts of which could have been 'invented' later by the village *kayastha* brotherhood to justify having lost part of the village. However, enough documentary evidence, in the form of land records and papers relating to law suits, filed in subsequent periods, exists to substantiate elements of the tale which is orally told, with different versions naturally, by the different parties like the descendants of the outside *zamindars*, the heirs of Brijbhushan Das and, of course, in the form of the folk-songs about *taula*-breaking.

The social stigma and the complicated legal status was too much for Brijbhushan Das who in settlement transferred a four *anna* (25 per cent) share to the rest of the village, sold his 25 per cent to a *bhumihar* zamindar of nearby Dhanaur village and migrated from the village with his nuclear family, going first to Pupri, then to Hanumangarh and finally to Nepal. His remaining *kayastha* kinsmen, left with a mere 25 per cent of the share of the village, could do nought but accept the situation as they neither had the wherewithal to take on the Nawab of Patna in prolonged legal battles nor the muscle-power to confront the *bhumihars* of Dhanaur. In subsequent decades the Nawab of Patna transferred sub-infeudatory rights or made outright sales to several parties, some in Changel itself and many in other nearby villages. The *zamindar* of Dhanaur, however, kept his holding intact for many years so that, until the 1950s, the largest single holding in the village of approximately 400 acres was held by the family as absentee owners. A Dhanaur *katchherry* (*zamindari* office) was set up in Changel and two families of *yadava* (cowherd) *sipahis* (retainers) were posted there to look after the property. After the passing

of the Bengal Tenancy Act in 1885, the *yadavas* claimed and acquired *Maurusi Raiyat* (Occupancy Tenant) status on some of the land and became relatively well-to-do. Meanwhile the caste solidarity and kinship of the *kayasthas* were irreparably shattered and after 'The Great Betrayal' by Brijbhushan Das, it became a situation of every nucleated unit for itself.

The economic position of different groups in the village changed quite dramatically. On the top now were the *zamindars* of Dhanaur. Then there were the many petty *zamindars* who received parcels from the Nawab of Patna. Those among this lot who were residents of the village itself were obviously at an advantage. The absentee *zamindars* either gave subordinate rights or their shares to some of them or appointed others as *karindas* (managers) or *munshis* to look after their interests. The village proprietorship itself, now amounting to merely 25 per cent of the lands, was distributed among several divided families and kept getting further subdivided with partitions among brothers. Contrary to popular belief regarding the division of property among brothers, the shares of different brothers were not equal. While there was no tradition of primogeniture in the absolute sense, the eldest brother got slightly more than an equal share of the ancestral property; the extra which he got was known as *jethansh* (the elder's portion).

After the Bengal Tenancy Act came into operation, some families claimed and acquired Occupancy Tenant status, a position which was achieved also by the *yadavas*, the various segments of the *brahmin* family and the *bhaginmaan kayasthas*. Two families from among the *noniyas*, the family of the *dhobi* who had served the British planter and the *manjan* (corruption of the Sanskrit *manya jan* or respected person, headman) of the *dhanuks* also acquired Occupancy Tenant status on various bits of land. The rest of the *dhanuks* continued to be tenants-at-will (*gair-maurusi*



*raiyats*) and the *khatbeys*, the original owners of the lands which had formed Changel, were of course the landless labourers.

The position became increasingly complicated among the *kayasthas* in particular as the same nuclear unit could be a *khudkasht jirat* and *nankar* owner, an extremely petty *zamindar*, an occupancy tenant, a manager of someone else's *zamindari* and an independent proprietor, all at once. Degrees of sub-infeudation increased. And along with it increased the rent demands.

The many elements of the total rent paid by tenants are illustrated by the very names of the different demands made either on a regular basis or from time to time. The following glossary of such terms is only illustrative and by no means exhaustive.

- Rent: *lagan* or *malguzari*
- Rent payable at a fixed rate: *chukauwa*
- Rent paid in cash: *mal*
- Rent paid in kind: *ain*
- Cash tenure: *nakdi* or *khap*
- Kind tenure: *bhaoli* or *mankhap*
- Rent charged as a fixed quantity of grain, irrespective of the proportion it bore to the whole crop: *manthika*
- Rent as fixed proportion of the whole crop: *batai*
- Money rents on special crops like tobacco: *japti*
- Rent on the spontaneous produce of a village, like wood: *bankar*
- Rent on the produce of ponds, lakes, streams etc: *jalkar*
- Labour rent: *corvee* or *begar*

In addition to these, landlords collected other perquisites too from tenants. Among the many such perquisites, some of the more important were:

- Personal service rendered to the landlord by the

tenants *en masse*: *gohar*

- Occasional demands of service or produce for special purposes: *hukumat* or *pharmais*
- Milk from tenants' milch cattle: *duhao*
- Cesses paid on special occasions: generally known as *abwab* or *salami*; among them, particular levies, for example, marriage fees (when tenants' children married): *biyahdani*
- Marriage fee (on second marriage): *dhingan* or *bhojni*
- Ploughing fee (for landlords' land): *hari* or *sangaha*
- Visiting fee (for landlords' visits): *salami*
- House fee (for construction or sale): *chauthh*
- Ground rent from artisans: *kothiyari*
- Transit duty from carts carrying goods: *bardana*
- Tax on weights and measures: *kauri*, *malkai*, *chutki* etc.

Indeed, the list of demands on peasants went on and on. In addition to the cesses collected by the *zamindars*, the tenants had to pay to others too. Among such payments, there were dues for religious and charitable purposes:

- For *brahmins*: *bisun ans* or *bisun pirit* or *siv ans*
- For the fire: *agaun*
- For expenses of village worship: *sawaia* (1.25 seers per *maund*)
- For beggars: *bhiksa* or *fakirana*

Through these, and many others whose number was legion, the landlords ensured for themselves not only comfort in this world, but tried to gather enough merit also for the next. On the other hand, the tenants just about managed to scrape together a living after they had met not only the multifarious demands made by the *zamindars* but also having paid the various fees to *zamindari* officials (like the *munshis*, *patwaris*, *karindas*, *sipahis*, etc.)



and village servants like the *gorait* or *chowkidar* (watchman), *mehtar* (sweeper) and the *yajmani* to different artisans. An apposite popular term for many of these demands was *nocha* (snatchings)!

In the case of Changel, the inability to pay revenue after having met such rapacious demands in time resulted in several auctions, and parts of village lands started being held as small *zamindaris* by people in Bishanpur, etc. just as people in Changel held on to petty *zamindaris* in Uphrauli and other villages.

The pressure of these increasing rent demands by several layers of the *zamindari* system was most felt right at the bottom. The *khatbeys* of course, having no ownership of cultivable lands or even homesteads, did not have to pay cash revenues but had to pay labour rent in the form of *begar* or *corvee* simply for being allowed to live. The economic strains generated on the intermediate landowning tenants resulted in their wages being reduced in a variety of ways: for instance, the linseed paste was dropped from their *jalkhai* (breakfast component of the daily wage) as the oilseed became a source of raising precious cash income. The market in linseed (and increasing commoditisation of other grains) brought into the village itself a family of *tehi banias* (oil-pressers and merchants) who also indulged in petty moneylending at the prevalent annual interest rate of 144 per cent (two *annas* per month) or more. Earlier, some credit had been generated by the *noniyas*, some *kayasthas* and the *paikars*. Large sums were still borrowed from outside the village from more prosperous traders and *zamindars*. The *dhanuks* were also pressed into *begar* and had to pay an occasional *abwab* (cess) when the *zamindars'* fancy led to some exceptional expenditure. The *batai* share was progressively reduced with charges being placed on the use of the ploughs, etc. of the original landowners. And, although the revenue remained in principle fixed as per the

Permanent Settlement, the ground rent for all classes of tenants kept rising to pay for the several layers of intermediaries who developed. At the same time, the rising population, intensification of land-use, partitions and sub-divisions created severe pressures. By the end of the 19th century, Changel was reduced to a village whose predominant aspect was one of poverty.





# From 'Babua' to 'Babusaheb'

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BACHCHA LEARNT OF the significance of being a man of property through Patwarji. Although his own ancestors had been honoured by the Raj for their knowledge of the agrarian laws and he could himself legitimately use the hereditary title of *kanungo* (learned in the laws), the fact was that Bachcha's family, like everyone else in the village, really depended on the memory and records of Patwarji when it came to issues concerning land.

Patwarji was a remarkable man: in fact he was not a *patwari* at all. The bright son of a poor *kayastha*, he had worked for a few years as an informal assistant of another keeper of land records. When his mentor passed away, he himself assumed the mantle of *patwari* without ever having been appointed to that position by anyone. He managed to scavenge and save some village maps and other records from his former employer's legacy and those became his stock-in-trade. The maps detailed plots of land on cloth. The ink on the maps, like memories of familial partitions and actual divisions of property, had faded a long time earlier and most of the records were in *Farsi*, Persian, which he could not read. However, these factors did not

deter him since hardly anyone else in the village could read them either and he scored over them through his literacy in the *Kaithi* script in which other land transactions were recorded.

Patwarji had further secured his position by befriending the *amin* (land measurer) in the neighbouring village. The *amin* required a secure place to store the tool of his own trade: the iron-tipped rod of bamboo of the type with which land has been measured in India ever since the reign of Akbar the Great. So important was this instrument to life in the village that it could not be stored just anywhere: till steel chains for measuring land came to the village much later, these bamboo rods were the only means of solving the many land disputes which took place. By providing place in his once rather grand but now somewhat decrepit ancestral house to the *amin* to store his measuring rod, Patwarji managed to obtain control over a vital implement.

However, what made Patwarji really important in the village was his ability to both instigate and solve land disputes. As an old widower, Patwarji had access to the womenfolk in most houses and it was for him part of a day's work to talk to such women about the importance of landownership by their immediate nuclear units even within joint families. In the totally male-dominated patriarchal order of Changel, women were not only deprived of formal power but even of information regarding the disposition of family property. In this arid desert of ignorance, Patwarji would descend like welcome rain.

He would first exchange greetings and gossip with the men of the family sitting on the outside *dalan* (forecourt). Then, on the excuse of getting fire from the kitchen to light his *hukkah*, which he always carried with him, he would make his way to the inner courtyard. Having lit his pipe and taken a few drags, he would turn his conversation



with the women of the house towards matters of landed property. '*Bin gharani ke ghar nahi, bin dharani ke dhar nahin* (A household cannot exist without the housewife and the body cannot live without land),' he would declare solemnly. He would proceed then to point out that while jointly-held family property was all right in the old days of truthfulness and trust, in these present dark times, every family unit should have the security of owning its own piece of land: '*Sukhak singar aa dukhak ahaar* (An ornament in times of prosperity and food in times of need)'. He would explain how easy it was to get land transfers registered at the Registration Office in Katra and how all it required was will. Having sown the seeds of family dissension in the fertile fields of female minds, he would take his leave.

After that, the natural processes of possessive individualism, outlined by the philosopher Hobbes and celebrated by the political scientist Oakshott, took over. The seven deadly sins do not require fertilisation to flourish, and envy is the most prolific among them. Wives would work on husbands so relentlessly that fraternal feelings, such as they were in the first place, were submerged. Differences of opinion turned into quarrels and quarrels sometimes even turned into fights. In the end, in the interest of overall peace and tranquillity, village elders would intercede: *panchayats* (arbitration councils of five members acceptable to both parties to the dispute) would meet and solemnly decree that the contending brothers had become *bhinn* (separate). With amazing speed, separate *chulhas* (fireplaces) would spring up. The division of the fire itself was often the climactic and traumatic moment in this process. There was much ceremony about this since, traditionally, in a time before safety matches had been invented, the domestic fire was never allowed to be totally extinguished: a few embers were always kept smouldering to ignite the fuel for

cooking the next meal. After that, it was only a matter of time for each segment to set up its own Bhagwati (the Mother Goddess), represented by a piece of red cloth near the fireplace. The partitioning of the hearth indicated the partitioning also of human hearts.

However, the real serious business of partitioning property still remained. And that is where Patwariji would reappear. He would pronounce on which plots of land belonged to the undivided family and how they could be partitioned. His ally, the *amin*, would pull out his measuring rod and chain and land would be measured with painful accuracy to ensure that both parties to the dispute got equal bits of land with comparable fertility. The result was that every plot kept getting divided and sub-divided over time till, by and large, only the proverbial handkerchief-size plots remained in Changel. The only exceptions were village commons, orchards and some large plots which were set apart, even during family partitions, as *jethansh* (the portions of the elder sons according to a rather vague interpretation of the rights of primogeniture).

Bachcha learnt this and more from Patwarjii and marvelled at the man's *modus operandi*. He was also struck by the fact that despite such cleverness, Patwariji remained essentially a poor man; his cunning was merely to help him survive without getting rich. Indeed, that was the predominant process at work in Changel: the village survived but it never prospered.

There were, of course, exceptions to this rule. Some families were relatively better off either because they had, by some coincidence, less male heirs than others or, more often, because they supplemented agricultural income with income from jobs and professions in the towns and cities. Bachcha's own family had both characteristics and he was therefore doubly blessed. Thus, as he grew up, he noticed that even his kinsmen in the village exhibited a



deferential attitude towards him, a deference which was not on account of his learning and certainly not related to his age but only on account of his family's relative prosperity. From being called *babua* (child) he began to be addressed respectfully as *babusaheb* (master). But even as he and his family prospered, if only in a relative manner, he also noticed that much of the rest of the village was sinking into abject poverty.



## *Reaction and Impoverishment*

*(circa 1880 to 1910)*

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ONE OF THE results of growing up is that the past becomes more and more interesting and important. Bachcha noticed this in his own case too. As a child he had wandered about Changel with nary a thought in the world. Paths were paths; houses were houses; trees were trees. Over a period of time, however, it struck him that some trees, their fruits, their leaves, even their shadows turned into mere memory. The *dabra* at the eastern end of the village where rainwater used to collect and cranes used to lay their eggs among the weeds was filled up gradually. A crooked *imli* (tamarind) tree used to stand in the very centre of the village and under it children played in the day and the male elders sat in the evening. That tree too fell down one day and was chopped up into firewood. Then there was the *kharhi*, a huge clump of reeds just outside the village habitation. It was close enough and dense enough for the womenfolk, even new brides married into Changel, to use as their lavatory since



it was not possible for them to use the male euphemism *maidan jaanaa* (going to the fields) for answering the calls of nature. In due course, the *kharhi*, with its eerie shadow cast by moonlight and its mysterious rustling sounds, was cut to make thatching for the huts, and women had to squat by the road after it got dark, hurriedly getting up and scampering away when the occasional motor vehicle passed by with headlights blazing.

Bachcha also remembered the tall toddy palm trees which the *pasi* (toddy-tapper) with a *labni* (earthen pot for collecting the intoxicating fluid) tied to his back would shin up with the agility of a monkey. The *pasi* would bring the filled *labni* down in the morning; the frothing liquid would ferment through the day outside his hut and the smell would attract tipplers like the flies which also hovered over the pot. In season, the *pasi* would also pluck and throw down the coconut-like fruit which when cut with his awe-inspiring scythe would yield delicious, cold *koa* (kernel). At night, the leaves of the toddy palm would rustle in the wind and cast fearsome shadows in the light of the moon. In time, many of these toddy palm trees also fell with age and their wood was used for rafters. Although some *pasis* continued toddy-tapping the few trees that remained and some of the *pasiains* (wives of *pasis*) still sell the brew along with spicy *ghunghni* (fried gram), most *pasis* took to other trades. Both sociology and ecology changed.

Ecology changed in other ways too. The most significant was the virtual disappearance of the many varieties of *bijju* (seed-grown) mango as the more profitable *kalami* (grafted) types became more popular. Bachcha remembered that as a child he used to wander through orchards where mango trees were laden with different types of the fruit. There were the *sinduria* (red as vermillion—*sindur*), the succulent *kerwa* (which resembled a banana—*kera*, *kela*—in shape though not in taste), the thin and long *mirchaiya*

which looked like an overgrown chilli—*mirchai*—and the round *ladooba* which was orange and spherical like the sweet—*ladoo*—from which it derived its name. In time, as these trees died out, their unpriced but abundant fruit became unavailable to the villagers, rich and poor alike, and 'imported' varieties prosaically called Maldah, Calcuttwa and Bombaiya started being grown for the market. The total number of trees in the village became fewer every year and what sustenance the poor derived from them kept getting reduced.

Bachcha realised from his own experience that of the several features of the poverty of Changel, one of the major contributing causes was ecological degradation. As pressure on the land increased, waste and uncultivated lands were brought under the plough. Thus, the natural depression of the Pahal on the south-western corner of the village, which had provided drainage, started being cultivated and the boundaries of holdings were demarcated. This obstructed the flow of water after the heavy monsoon and water-logging became a recurrent phenomenon. As fallows in the south-eastern corner of the village started being cultivated, several problems followed. Pastures were reduced, animal husbandry became more and more difficult and the availability of milk and milk products were restricted to the upper echelons of Changel's population. Earlier, the uncultivated *chauras* had been used not only as pastures but also as sources of salt-rich soil from which salt had been made by the village *noniyas*. Now salt had to be purchased from outside the village. The alkaline, yellowish-white *chikni mati* (smooth soil) from the *chauras* had been used as a kind of soap to clean clothes and to wash women's hair. As its availability decreased, substitutes in the form of synthetic soaps had to be found.

Many aspects of poverty arose not only from cultivation of new lands but also from changes in the prevalent land-



use patterns. The absentee *zamindars*, particularly those of Dhanaur, converted some of their fields into mango orchards, thus reducing the total land under paddy. Their example was emulated by the *brahmins* and some of the *kayasthas*, too, who were finding paddy cultivation cumbersome, especially in areas which tended to get water-logged or where the soil was alkaline. As the growing of mangoes caught on—and horticultural experiments were carried out, notably by one Durabi Lall who bred a large variety of mangoes which are still known by his name—the fruit which used to be a free food in season acquired exchange value. For many years there was no market outside the village for its mangoes but a kind of sharecropping developed in the village itself with the actual cultivator-cum-watchman getting 25 per cent of the produce and the landowner getting the rest. As wild *bijju* mangoes started being replaced by cultured *kalami* varieties, the fruit ceased to be easily available to the village poor to supplement their diet in the cruel summer months when little else other than *ragi* was available. With the fame of the new varieties spreading, *paikars* started buying Changel mangoes for sale in neighbouring villages. At the same time, while mango trees were being planted in fairly large numbers on the one side, there was a decrease in the number of other trees like *siso* and bamboo which yield wood for buildings—*imarati lakri*. The eventual consequence was a decline in housing, yet another sign of overall poverty.

But the most important factor in the impoverishment of Changel in general and its labouring people in particular was the fact that the village got sucked into the market. Cash needs for revenue payment led to the sale of grain. That resulted in a chain of effects. To take just one example, for selling grain at relatively better rates in the market village of Aurai (12 kilometres away), some households acquired bullock-carts which required a better

breed of bullocks than were locally available, better wheelcraft than the village blacksmith-cum-carpenter could provide, iron rims for the wheels, and so on.

However, while globalised India is now said to be poised for a take-off into the 21st century, even today Changel remains in the bullock-cart age. There has been a change, however, in this respect too. In the last few years, several villagers have given up their obsolete, bone-jerking, wooden-wheeled carts and have acquired carts with pneumatic rubber wheels. These are known as *tair* (tyre) *garis* and their frame and axle are manufactured by the multinational corporation Dunlop, an example of this modern business agglomerate addressing itself to intermediate technology, appropriate from the point of view of its profits. On the other side, the village cartwrights have had to pay the price of progress!

Dependence on the market increased. With the decline of handlooms in general, many of the weavers of Simri-Bakhtiapur too were rendered jobless in the face of competition from mill-made cloth imported from Britain and, later, from Bombay and Ahmedabad, Muzaffarpur town developed into the largest textile wholesale trade centre in north Bihar and commerce received an added boost through the opening of the Oudh-Tirhut Railway in the last quarter of the 19th century. Although Changel was quite far from the railway line and the few roads that were constructed, the market nevertheless engulfed it, causing an overall drain through unequal exchange because of essentially distress sales from the village. Thus was poverty accentuated.

Villagers responded in a variety of ways to this process of impoverishment. The agricultural labourers and *bataidars* were pushed into the chronic debt syndrome and many were converted into bonded labourers of one sort or the other. There developed a brisk system of land mortgage—*bharna*—and even outright sales—*kewala*—of small plots



which were numerous among the landed segments. Among them, too, indebtedness developed and new systems of debt-recording arose. Most of the mortgages were oral transactions but some were recorded on government stamp paper, like *kewala* sales, at the Land Registration Office. The records of that Office at Katra are an invaluable source for estimating the magnitude of the land market, although, obviously, less than half the story has been put down on paper.

Earlier, in fact, all such transactions were oral and at most only the gods were cited as witnesses. A popular method of invoking the gods was to hold an ammonite (*saligram*) or Ganga water (*gangajal*) along with a few holy basil (*tulsi*) leaves in a copper (*tamba*) vessel and swear an oath. The last, the *tulsi-tamba* oath, was considered particularly binding. Of course, *brahmins* could always break even such an oath and their frequent perjury may have given rise to the saying:

*Sil, sut, Haribans lai, beech gangak dhar  
etek lai babhan, tau na karah itbar*

'If a *brahmin* swears by the ammonite, his son, the *Haribans* (a religious tome), and in the midst of the Ganges—still don't believe him.'

However, the sanctity of the oath was generally observed and the practice of swearing on *tulsi-tamba* still continues, especially among the poor and generally on matters not involving money or property. Nevertheless, as 'modernity' came to Changel, new forms of evidence also arose. Now, for borrowing money, for instance, promissory handnotes—IOWs—were executed: a few handnotes of the 1890s are still extant in the village.

But the most important way in which Changel responded to 'modernisation' and consequent impoverishment was through out-migration of its males,

to start with, among the *kayasthas* and later, among almost all the caste groups. Even earlier, the *kayasthas* had not been totally tied to the land. Traditionally literate and taking to clerical occupations, several of them had worked outside the village as *munshis*, *patwaris*, etc. The importance of literacy among the *kayasthas* is reflected in their principal caste festival which is *dawat puja* (worship of the ink-pot) during which they invoke their ancestor-cum-god, Chitrugupta, holding pen and ink in hand: '*Lekhani katni hasta Chitruguptay namastute*.' Thus in Changel, which still does not have a functioning primary school, the level of literacy among *kayastha* men and women is nevertheless very high. The 'founder' of the village, Dullah Ram, and its principal 'villain', Brijbhushan Das, were both *munshis* and had worked outside the village. Thus, when the poverty-push affected the village in a big way, several *kayastha* young men moved off to get jobs outside the village. In the beginning, most of them continued to get employment as *patwaris* but, in due course, other avenues too opened up for them. The Permanent Settlement and the growing land market had increased the demand for land-surveyors and crop-assessors—*amins*—and several *kayasthas* of Changel became *amins*. A few became teachers in the 'courts'—*katchherries*—of neighbouring *zamindars* and later even in the government schools which came up here and there. Some, who ventured out to towns like Muzaffarpur, became letter-writers and one became an accountant for a Marwari cloth-trader.

None of these migrants, however, cut off connections with the village. Their families continued to live in the village and they continued to visit them periodically. When these *naukariharas* (those who had jobs outside the village) came to Changel, they brought clothes, silver jewellery, and even cash in the form of *cowries* (shells which were currency then), small copper pies (twelve to an *anna* which itself was sixteen to a rupee), copper *paise*



with holes in their centres (four to an *anna*), and occasionally even silver rupees with pictures on them of the portly 'Maharani' Victoria, who ruled India and Changel from across the seas. Some of the *cowries*, *paise* and even some silver rupees were strung on threads and used as jewellery along with heavy silver *hansulis* (neck bands) and thus went out of circulation, but this inflow of cash to the village brought by the *naukariharas* represented a reversal, to an extent, of the drain from the village.

The import of currency into the village, which even included a few gold *asharfis* or guineas, must have considerably eased the payment of revenue. For while the *zamindar* could be paid rent in kind, revenue to the government had to be paid in cash. Grierson says, 'Rents are generally calculated in the old *sicca* rupees of Akbar, which are converted into current coinage by adding exchange rates, called *batta mal* and *batta Kampani*. The *batta mal* is added direct to the rent in *sicca* rupees, and denotes the exchange rate between them and the Murshidabadi coin introduced in the year 1773. In 1835, the introduction of the (East India) Company's rupee, 1.066 of which equalled 15/16 of the Murshidabadi rupee, led to the imposition of a further rate of exchange, called *batta Kampani*, which is calculated and added to the rent calculated in *sicca* rupees plus *batta mal*. Each of these rates of exchange is generally less than one *anna* per rupee.'

Apart from the fact that the devaluation of coinage added to the rent burden, the very shortage of currency of adequate denominations would have also caused great hardship in the context of the need to pay revenue in cash. Before some currency started coming into Changel in the form of remittances from its 'migrants', it can be assumed that enough cash was painstakingly collected through the sale of oil-seeds and other 'cash crops'. The influx of currency would therefore have been greatly welcomed.

Before a significant amount of cash came into the village, however, the principal form of savings was jewellery. The jewellery was described as *sukhak singar*, *dukhak ahaar* (ornaments in happy times and a source of sustenance in times of distress) and it is not surprising, given the prevalence of distress in Changel, that in due course a substantial amount of such jewellery found its way to the *baniya* (moneylender): when a descendant *baniain* (*baniya's* wife) died an issueless widow in 1963, her heirs sold no less than 500 Victorian silver coins at the then prevalent price of seven rupees each for her grand funeral. That this would have represented a very large amount at the time that it was brought into the village is clear from the fact that in the 1880s, the highest salary-earner from Changel, a person who was employed to read the scriptures and, significantly, newspapers, to the *zamindar* of Binda (about 30 miles from Changel), was paid a salary of eight *annas* (Rs. 0.50) per month! That such currency became a common mode of exchange in the village is testified by the strings of *paisa* neck and waist bands which even *khatbey* children wear to date. In due course, as the price of silver rose and those of grain fell, particularly in the 1930s during the Great Depression, the *becha* system of barter prevalent in the village from the earliest times was increasingly given up for cash transactions. In any case, even in the late 19th century, the 'migration' of several Changel villagers made a significant economic and social impact.

By the 1890s, the migrant Changel *kayasthas* realised that just being literate in *Kaithi*, Urdu and Persian and knowing intricate arithmetical tables like those of 1/4, 3/4, compound interest, etc., was not enough and that it was important to acquire an 'English education'. Thus, some of the brighter boys of the *kayasthas* were selected and sent off with accompanying *dhanuk* servants—*khawas*—to the lower school in Baigna, the middle school in Yajuar



and finally to the Northbrook Zila school in Darbhanga. Only one of those boys managed to complete secondary education and became eligible for taking the Entrance Examination, then held in Calcutta because that was where the University was located. Two other boys, although unable to complete their secondary education, nevertheless learnt enough English to get 'high' jobs, one as a clerk in the Investment Department of the Darbhanga Raj from where he retired in 1960 at the princely salary of Rs 75 per month, having been appointed at a wage of Rs 200 per month, and the other as a junior manager of the Muzaffarpur charitable institution, Home for the Homeless. Following the adage that charity begins at home, as his own house in the village was affected by the shortage of wood, he thought it only right to help himself occasionally to the funds of the Home—an example of primitive accumulation through what is now widely practised in Bihar and is occasionally labelled as corruption—and built one room in his house of burnt bricks with a flat roof held up on *saguwan* rafters laboriously imported into the village.

The boy who appeared in the entrance examination in Calcutta was not allowed to sit for it the first year that he went there as he was found to be under-age and finally passed the examination in 1911. However, the first year he returned from Calcutta with wondrous tales not only of having travelled by bullock cart and foot up to Simaria Ghat (near Barauni) on the river Ganga, having crossed the river on a steamer ship operated by the Eastern Indian Railway, and then by train to the great metropolis, but also of various aspects of life in Calcutta, including tales of *Swadeshi*. With him arrived the National Movement to isolated Changel.

Even earlier, Changel's isolation had started breaking. One adventurous person, the *akhbarnavis*—newspaper reader of the Binda Raj—had travelled, mostly on foot, as

early as the 1880s, to remote Nasik on pilgrimage. On the way back he had picked up a beautiful phallus-shaped stone from the bed of the Narmada river and carried it back to Changel where it was hailed as a representation of *Narmadeshwar Mahadev* (Shiva) and installed in a temple. The temple was built by masons from Binda and with the installation of this idol, the villagers gave up the exclusive Vaishnavism enjoined on them by the *pandits* in the time of Nihal Das and took to an eclectic Hinduism which resulted in the neglect and decay of the Krishna temple constructed earlier, but which did not affect the worship of the Mother Goddess. The latter increasingly became the prerogative of the womenfolk though vital ceremonies like the pre-agricultural season function in the *Adra Nakshatra* (monsoon) continued to be performed by the men. The bringing in of the *Narmadeshwar Mahadev* into Changel, however, represented an important event in the integration of the village into the broader aspects of Hindu pilgrimage, etc.

Several people from the village have travelled in the years that followed to important pilgrimage centres like Deogarh, Kashi (Varanasi), Gaya, etc. The *pandas* (officiating priests) in those centres maintain meticulous records of pilgrims. These records may prove to be valuable historical source material. However, in the case of the pilgrims from Changel, they may prove to be difficult to trace as many pilgrims are recorded not by the *panda* in charge of their own village but by those of the village of their employers. The records at Deogarh, for instance, show the *akhbarnavis* from Changel (and his descendants) having been conducted in pilgrimage by the *panda* whose *yajmani* included Binda Raj but not Changel, indicating that the *akhbarnavis* probably made the pilgrimage in the company of his employer's family rather than in his own individual capacity. His long association with the Binda Raj and repeated visits probably led to his being 'adopted' by the



particular *panda* whose family now has the records.

At a different level, the boys who had studied in Darbhanga and had visited Muzaffarpur in the early years of the 20th century brought in tales of opposition to the British Raj and in particular spoke of a Khudiram Bose who had thrown a bomb at the *gora sahebs* (white officials) in Muzaffarpur and had been subsequently hanged by the British. Perhaps as a result of hearing about such talk among the educated young men of Changel, the Raj decided keep a strict eye on them but, as a sufficient police force was not available in the *thana* at Katra, instead of constables, only a *chowkidar* and *dafadar* were appointed in 1908. It seemed for a while that even the presence of these lowly functionaries of the state, with their grand red and blue *safas* (turbans), was enough to check incipient 'disloyalty' in Changel. However, the return of the boy who had gone to Calcutta, with tales of the *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal, did incite a wave of a sort of nationalism during which several people took the oath to give up using foreign-made cloth. Until their death in the 1960s, at least two of the oath-takers kept to their promise.

Other changes were also taking place in Changel during this period. While the Congress and the Constitutional Reforms of 1909 were too remote to have significant impact, the Survey Settlement Operations in the first decade of the 20th century did result in many changes. Occupancy tenants were recorded on paper and the first cracks in the *zamindari* system, the bedrock of the Raj, appeared. A significant aspect of this was that the *yadava* retainers of the Dhanaur *zamindari* were enabled by registering their occupancy tenure to free themselves to an extent from total dependence on their masters, and to branch out on their own in the entrepreneurial activity of selling *ghee* (clarified butter), the only milk produce which could be easily stored and marketed without getting

spoiled. Yet another important development was that a few of the *dhanuks* who had gone as *khawas* with the students did not return with them and stayed on in alternative employment in the towns. One of them in fact stayed on in Calcutta for several years and was a precursor of later significant migration by his clansmen from Changel.





# Continuity and Backwardness

(circa 1910 to 1930)

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A MUCH LATER migrant from Changel was Bachcha himself but in his case the process of migration was much more complex. His father, and indeed his grandfather too, had moved out of the village in a sense. However, his grandfather had retained his 'permanent abode' in the village, commuting to Muzaffarpur and Patna to practise law. His father's migration was of a longer-term nature. He too had commuted between Changel and the towns during his years in school and college and even later when he took on a variety of jobs in the private sector since he had sworn not to serve the British Raj. When India became independent, he joined government service and, as such, he was transferred from place to place, visiting Changel only during rare vacations but returning there to stay after he retired. Bachcha's migration was different.

For one, he was born in Muzaffarpur, the district town, although his years of infancy and early childhood were

spent in Changel. By the time he had to enter formal school, he was brought to Patna but not before attending the early education imparted by the village teacher, the venerated but much feared *guruji* whose pedagogy was based more on the use of the supple bamboo stick than on opening up the wonderful world of knowledge to his pupils. In *guruji's* establishment, elementary literacy was perfected either on slates on which the alphabet was painfully inscribed with blocks of *khari* (chalk). The major content of education was memorising multiplication tables, including those of fractions, and learning was largely by rote. It was not for nothing, therefore, that the 'Om namah siddham', the opening invocation to the gods before lessons, was distorted by the students to the mischievous chant of 'Onamasi dhang; *guruji chittang* (Even as "Onamasi" is sounded, the teacher falls down flat)'. Bachcha did not notice it then but it struck him much later that all the pupils of the *guruji* were from the 'touchable' castes: many *kayasthas*—significantly both boys and girls—and some *brahmins* and a few *baniyas*—significantly only boys.

The preparatory school that Bachcha was admitted to in Patna was very different. For one, it was run by a set of five Bengali spinster sisters. Then, the eldest dressed like a male *sannyasi* and divided her loyalties equally between the Rama Krishna Mission and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) which was affiliated to the Communist Party of India. There were dark rumours, which Bachcha heard but did not quite comprehend, that she had once been a revolutionary wanted by the police and had changed her appearance to evade arrest. Whatever might have been the truth about her, Bachcha was at least clear about the third sister: she was raving mad and had to be kept locked up in a room. She used to peer through the bars of the window of her prison and make weird noises at the students who sat on the verandah outside. One day, she somehow came out and smacked Bachcha



from behind with such force that he bled from his nose, and sat utterly petrified staring blearily at the patterns that the red drops of blood made on the open copybook in front of him. The youngest of the sisters too was a little peculiar. She was well educated and quite pleasant ordinarily—till one day when she took a flying leap into the well next to the school. They fished her out before she could drown and packed her off to the famous Kanke Mental Hospital at Ranchi. Apparently, she recovered her sanity, studied further and later became a psychiatrist at the hospital itself. The other two sisters were boringly normal but altogether they provided an exciting entrance for Bachcha into the world of formal education.

Transition from this small nursery school to the massive cement-grey academy run by the Jesuits near the famous Gandhi Maidan of Patna was a bit of an anti-climax but Bachcha coped with it. If life was more predictable, there were compensations too. The studies conducted by the predominantly Irish American *padres* were systematic; and the food was good, wholesome New England fare. There was a large library and a requirement to read at least one English fiction, one non-fiction and one Hindi book every week outside the prescribed syllabus. Much more exciting was a 'casual library' of thousands of paperbacks in the room of one of the Fathers and that gave access to Bachcha to the Penguin world of Wodehouse, Chesterton, Belloc and the Pelican universe of ideas. Besides, the Gandhi Maidan itself, where the playgrounds were located, was an immense theatre of life. There were hawkers and peddlers, acrobats and conjurers, courting couples behind bushes and retired bureaucrats taking their constitutional. And there were political meetings: Nehru and Rajendra Prasad, Cariappa and Krishna Menon, Jyoti Basu and Karyanand Sharma all spoke at the Gandhi Maidan and Bachcha and his friends could not escape early political education. This incursion

of politics unobtrusively into daily life was also taking place in Changel even as it was occurring in the life of one of its migrant children.

Bachcha passed from this academic theatre to a larger educational and professional arena soon enough and, even as he was doing so, others too from Changel were moving on in life. There were more and more migrants from Changel who got on in life at different levels and brought in different mores into their village when they returned. They changed ways of speech, modes of dress, manners and even livelihood. And, as they changed through migration, so did the village.

In spite of these changes, however, the predominant aspect of Changel for many years was continuity and backwardness rather than change and development. This was best typified by the *khatbeys* who continued to remain in absolute poverty, eking out their existence on the basis of seasonal agricultural labour and being reduced to scraping *ghonga-situa* (snails and shells) found in the various ponds in the village. The 'Village Note' prepared in connection with the Survey Settlement Operations at the beginning of the 20th century does not have much to say about the *khatbeys* but records that there were, at that time, no less than six *pokhairs* in Changel, three for common village use and the other three, the *pandit's* pond and two other ponds, known as *Babu Pokhair* and *Bahu Pokhair* respectively, for the exclusive use of their proprietors. A folk-song sung by the *khatbeys* poignantly describes hunger and in it the singer exhorts his listeners to go to Bairgania (near the Nepal border) to get *alhua* (sweet potatoes) to eat, but there is no recorded or even oral evidence of significant migration having taken place among the *khatbeys* till later, when much else had changed.

The song can be dated because it is known that it was only in the beginning of the 20th century that the cultivation of sweet potatoes was popularised in the area,



partly through the efforts of the Agricultural Institution which was set up in Pusa in North Bihar. Later, after the devastating earthquake of 1934 which destroyed the agricultural lands around it, the major part of the Institute was shifted to Delhi where it is located on a road known as Pusa Road.

In the period of the Survey Settlement Operations, however, agricultural innovations were not many in Changel, although there were some abortive attempts to grow sugar-cane. The motor for whatever changes that took place in village in that period was located outside.

The person who best represented the village's link to the 'outside' was the same person who had passed the Entrance Examination of Calcutta University. Some years later he graduated from the Grierson Bhumihar Brahmin College (later renamed Langat Singh College, after a self-made *bhumihar* notable, and now forming the core of Bihar University, which itself had recently been renamed Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar Bihar University) at Muzaffarpur and in due course he became a lawyer. The Grierson after whom the college was first named was the same person whom we have cited, a civil servant as well as a remarkable scholar. Langat Singh cannot be called a 'ragged-trouser'd philanthropist' (having lost a leg in a railway accident in his early years, he never wore European trousers), but came nearest to that description. For the *bhumihars* in particular, Langat Singh became a caste-benefactor and, having started from humble beginnings, something of a folk hero. To date, the college and the Bihar University are considered strongholds of *bhumihars*, so much so that when in 1990 the government sought to rename the university after Dr Ambedkar, the founding father of the Indian Constitution and the most distinguished member of what are known as the Scheduled Castes, there was considerable resistance from the *bhumihars*. In the early 20th century, however, many notable

members of its staff, like Acharya Kripalani and Professor Malkani, were, curiously, Sindhis, and it was they who initially hosted Mahatma Gandhi.

While in that College, the young man from Changel came into contact with a teacher, J.B. Kripalani, who entrusted him with the task of arranging for the fanning of an important guest who visited the College. The guest was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and he had halted in Muzaffarpur on his way to Champaran where he was going to investigate the atrocities perpetrated by the British indigo planters. While fanning the guest, our young man from Changel decided to go along with Gandhi to Champaran and thereon became inextricably involved with the National Movement.

Thus, through almost an accident, the National Movement came to Changel. Since Changel was not an indigo-growing village, the Nilha Satyagraha (Indigo Satyagraha) did not have any impact on its economy or politics. In nearby Gangiya village, however, there was a planter's bungalow called 'Neel Kothi'. When the anti-indigo movement climaxed in Champaran, the English planter started getting uneasy and decided to leave if he could find someone to buy his property. However, he was ultimately driven out not because of the intensity of the agitation but because indigo cultivation became uneconomical when artificial chemical dyes were invented. But unlike in Champaran, where many indigo planters sold out their considerable holdings to Marwaris who set up sugar factories (so much so that the phenomenon was summed up in the pithy saying '*Nilhe gaye, milhe aaye*—The indigo planters left but the sugar mill-owners came'), the Gangiya *saheb* found a buyer for his lands among the upwardly mobile *bhumihars* and there was no transition to industrial economy in the region.

Changel too did not see many stirring events, either political or economic, and the various Non-Cooperation



and Civil Disobedience Movements came and went with hardly any government machinery to resist, but the spirit of the times was so well internalised that even in 1994, on a cold winter morning, a villager was heard singing in the course of his *parati* (morning song) the hymn of the early 1920s: '*Bharat Janani teri jaya teri jaya ho/Gandhi jiye or Tilak bhi phir aaen/Shri Aurobindo, Lala, Bipin ki vijay ho* (May victory come to Mother India; may Gandhi live for long and may Tilak come back (alive); may Aurobindo (Ghosh), Lala (Lajpat Rai) and Bipin (Chandra Pal) achieve victory)'. It may be recorded that the singer followed up this nationalistic yearning for freedom with the pathetic wail of '*Kakhan harab dukh mor hey Bholanath, kakhan harab dukh mor?* (O God, when will you take away my sorrow?)'. The singer, one of the poorest people of Changel, still had much sorrow even as the Republic of India was nearing half-a-century of Independence!

While the first stirrings of the National Movement were gathering strength outside, life continued more or less as usual in Changel. By the beginning of the 20th century, several people from the village were working outside and there was a fairly steady stream of inward remittances. There was no post office in the village but that was no great disadvantage as, in any case, most of the money from outside was brought personally. By now, the migrants were not only *kayasthas* but also people of other castes. For instance, when Patna became an important town on becoming the capital of the newly-formed state of Bihar, some *dhanuks* and *noniyas* found employment there in tea shops etc. No migrant until then had, however, taken his 'family' (that is, the womenfolk) to the town and, when the Census recorded numbers in the village, even the migrants were counted, a practice which continues in most cases even today. Thus, after the 19th century, although the population of the village has been recorded in thousands, at any given time the effective resident

population has been much less. Even this migration, however, did not have any radical impact on the social life of the village as it continued to be the permanent 'home' for almost all such people. Indeed, after the epochal migration from the village by the disgraced Brijbhushan Das and his family, until the present day, hardly any other permanent migration seems to have taken place from the village.

The structure of land-holding also did not change much. There were a large number of sales and purchases and an even larger number of mortgages, but land tended to circulate within clans. As the *zamindari* of the Patna Nawab became fragmented, portions of even that were bought back by several villagers themselves and, at most, by the *zamindars* of Dhanaur, *bhumihars* who had become 'honorary villagers' by then. There were, as described above, several layers of infeudation and sub-infeudation, but the picture, in spite of its many complications, was fairly stable. Usually, while one person in the family, generally the eldest brother, worked outside the village, such property as the family had, either as *zamindari* or *raiyyati* (tenancy), was managed by the younger brother and minor adolescent male children. The practice of according *jethansh* (an extra portion of the ancestral property, after equal division among brothers, to the eldest brother) may have been reinforced by recognition of the contribution of the eldest brother to the family fortunes by taking upon himself the onerous task of working outside the village. Thus, while the *akhbarnavis* Anoop Narayan Das continued to work at the Bindra Raj, and his son, Prabhu Narayan, became a lawyer and grew more and more involved in the Congress Party, Anoop Narayan's younger brother, along with his own eldest son, Harivansh Narayan Das (who too later became a lawyer), looked after the property of that joint family.

At that stage, the property consisted of a three *anna*



(approximately 20 per cent) share of the residual ancestral property, including a petty *zamindari*. (These figures give an indication of the partitions and sub-divisions of property in the half-century that had followed Brijbhushan Das). In addition, there were some *nankar* lands, several head of cattle, about five acres of mango orchards, and a bicycle which Prabhu Narayan had brought into the village when he had started practising law in 1918-19 with an initial, and then princely, fee of five rupees per court appearance. Among other items of curious examination by the villagers even half-a-century later were several things brought in by Prabhu Narayan. Among these were a dollar pocket-watch—which had cost him five rupees which was then equivalent to one dollar—and a medal with the picture of King George V and Queen Mary which had been awarded to him for doing well in his studies the year (1911) the King Emperor had visited India. It is significant that the joint family operated only as far as the management of agricultural property was concerned; cash earnings and remittances were handled by the womenfolk (wives, mothers or daughters-in-law) of the concerned migrants' immediate nuclearised families. This duality led to a great deal of bitterness when property was partitioned among brothers particularly with respect to lands which might have been bought by the women out of their cash savings, and long litigations also took place on this account.

It was in this period, circa 1910 to 1930, that some changes also occurred in agricultural practices in Changel. The introduction of *alhua* (sweet potatoes) and the abortive attempt to cultivate sugar-cane has already been mentioned. While the latter did not succeed as there were no sugar mills nearby, nor was there a traditional *khandsari* or *gur*-making unit in the vicinity, the former caught on in a big way and became an important crop, cultivated during the otherwise lean summer months. Most of this

cultivation, however, was done through sharecropping as, like *marua*, the crop required intensive irrigation for which paid labour would have proved too costly. It became a staple in poor people's diet and, in due course, even formed a component of the wage in kind. Starch (carbohydrate) availability was thus also augmented to an extent.

On the protein front, the village began the cultivation of *dals* like *arhar* and *boot* (gram). Gram had many other local names like *chana*, *badam*, *rahila*, etc. It was valued for its many uses. For example:

*Ehi rahila ke puri kachauri*  
*Ehi rahila ke dal*  
*Ehi rahila ke kailon kiraura*  
*Bahut motael gaal*

'I made this gram into puris and savouries; I made this gram into *dal*, I made the gram into pottage, and my cheeks got very fat.'

Crops like *arhar* and *boot* proved to be popular items of cultivation as the former could be grown on otherwise uncultivable lands and the latter could be combined with mustard or barley and, later, even with wheat, to use land optimally during the spring *rabi* crop. *Jau-butta*, a combination of barley and gram, proved to be a useful mixture to give as wages in kind.

Increasing pressure on the land, of which the best illustration was the drive to cultivate a second crop, also resulted in some land improvement. During the 1920s, probably as part of the *zamindari ahar-pyne* irrigation system, an irrigation channel was dug from the Lakhandei river to the southern fields of Changel. *Karins* or *dhenkis*, also known as *lathas* (dug-out-tree-trunks fixed on bamboo stands) were erected to scoop out water for irrigation from the by then disused *Bahu pokhair* (pond). Some



bunding of fields was also done and attempts were made in a few cases, through mutual transfer or even sale-purchase of land parcels, to consolidate holdings. It may be supposed that, according to the traditional practice of Changel, labour on land improvement exercises would have been supplied by the *khatbeys*, but the scale of work and the wages were not such as to make a significant impact on their level of existence.

As there were no sources of institutional finance, the funding of these land improvement measures must have been either through family savings, increased incomes from sales of grain in the late 1930s and 1940s which were periods of rising prices, or from non-institutional borrowings. There were, of course, some occasional advances or loans given by the *zamindars* to the tenants for production purposes. Such loans for seeds were known as *bihan*, for sinking wells and constructing other irrigation works as *taccavi*, for purchasing bullocks as *adhlappa*, and for other purposes as *karja*. However, the rates of interest on such advances were extremely high, with the lender not only receiving back the amount but also half the profits made from that investment. *Adhlappa* in fact is a corruption of *Adh-nafa* (half profit). As the terms of repayment were very stringent and the loans were of short duration, they were not very popular. In any case, in Changel, there were few *zamindars* with sufficient liquidity to advance large loans.

An attempt was made in the late 1920s to set up a co-operative in the village and Prabhu Narayan even persuaded the 'Father of the Co-operative Movement in Bihar', Deep Narayan Singh of Hajipur (who became a Congress minister after Independence), to visit Changel once. This was the only instance of the village having been visited by an eminent politician (other leaders bypassing the village on account of its inaccessibility), but even the efforts of Deep Babu, such as they could have

been during the course of a day-long stay, did not bear fruit. A society was indeed established and a *mantri* (secretary) was nominated but the co-operative did not take off, its only vestige remaining in the form of one Trilok Jha, a *brahmin*, who, to the day of his death, was referred to by every one in the village, including his wife, as Mantriji! Thus, whatever improvements took place in the agriculture of Changel were largely self-financed, a situation which remains largely unaltered till today.

Meanwhile, in 1930, the village managed to suffer the ire of the British Raj by actively participating in the Salt *Satyagraha*. Making salt was not new in the village, its *noniyas* having been adept at salt manufacture, but in that year it was manufactured with great ceremony to defy the salt levy imposed by the British. Mahatma Gandhi had called for this, and although Changel was nowhere on the routes which the Mahatma took on his various tours through rural India, he was held in great reverence as 'Ganhi Baba' and even bestowed with semi-divine properties. It is not surprising therefore that his call was heeded even in remote Changel. A temple of Shiva was built at the southern extreme of the village, land in front of the temple was cleared, and, with the blessing of *Mahadev* and the Mahatma, of God and Gandhi, salt was ceremonially prepared. Thus did Changel register that it had become a part of the National Upsurge.

Unfortunately for many people, the fact was registered only too well. The *chowkidar* and *dafadar*, appointed for just such occasions, rushed with the news to the *thana* at Katra and the *Daroga* (Police Sub-Inspector) arrived in the village with a posse of *Lal Pagri* (Red Turbaned) constables. Most adults of the village were rounded up and beaten and this thrashing was administered regardless of caste. One of the *khatbeys* who had his leg smashed, continued to limp until he died in 1960. With characteristic rural cruelty of expression this venerable Freedom Fighter was



referred to as 'Nengra (The Lame One)'!

Others were not beaten up so badly but constables entered houses to search for salt and abuses were showered on womenfolk. Five ringleaders, consisting of two *kayasthas*, one *noniya*, one *dhanuk* and one *brahmin*, were arrested and taken to prison. They were released only in 1932. At the same time, collective fines were imposed on the village as a whole and inability or refusal to pay meant that some lands were auctioned off. These fines had to be paid to the government but the village had to bear the additional burden of billeting the policemen who had to be fed well. Their usual *mamul* exaction of chicken for their diet could not have been supplied by this *Vaishnav*-dominated village which even now does not have poultry, but, in addition to the costs of their food and accommodation and charges for trouble given to them, the policemen collected their usual *kamar-kholai* (literally, a charge for loosening one's belt or bending one's waist) which referred to presents made to or demanded by a police officer or government peon entering a village.

A simultaneous auction took place of some other lands as a result of litigation regarding loans taken by villagers from such big *zamindars*, including those of Dhanaur and Binda, which the villagers claimed on disputed evidence to have paid back. The dispute finally ended only in 1973 after prolonged litigation which went up to the Supreme Court and the lands were returned to the original owners. However, when the auction took place, it added to the problems of the villagers. The fact that all these occurred in the period of the Great Depression, when grain prices crashed, intensified the misery of the landed people.

In this context, to suppose that the agricultural labourers were not very adversely affected as they were in any case grain-deficit, had no surpluses to sell and received their wages substantially in kind, would appear logical but in fact is fallacious. For one, there was hardly any grain

purchased by the labourers as they had practically no cash income, wages being paid traditionally in kind; so they did not benefit from falling grain prices. On the other hand, the passing of lands into the hands of 'outsiders' deprived them of whatever marginal advantages they received from the traditional patron-client relationships. During this period of economic hardship, some tenants lost their lands because they were unable to pay the revenue/rent. Such lands were converted into nominally self-cultivated lands (*bakasht malik*) by the *zamindars* who, in most cases, gave the same plot to the tenants on *bataidari*, thus covering occupancy tenants with some protection under the law into rightless tenants-at-will.

### Growing Up

Although he visited the village only during his vacations, Bachcha observed these changes that were taking place in Changel. He noticed, for instance, that those agricultural labourers he had played with as a child aged much faster than himself. Not only did they start working in the houses and in the fields when they were still very young but there was also a marked change in their relationship with him over the years. While they had been friends as children, playing among haystacks and swimming together in the village ponds, growing up meant that Bachcha became *malik* while the others became mere labourers. The modes of interaction changed and even body language altered.

This made Bachcha profoundly uncomfortable and he posed many questions to his elders. 'Why is it,' he asked, 'that grain touched by these labourers remained pure while food cooked by them became polluted? Why was it that friends who played together and even wrestled with each other got divided into the touchable and untouchable



castes? Why is it that different people prayed to different gods? Were the gods of the poor somehow lesser in their divinity?' These questions remained largely unanswered though the Gandhians among the elders did theoretically reject untouchability and occasionally even sat with the Muslims from the neighbouring Neudu *tola*.

Meanwhile, at the level of everyday life, modes of social interaction and even entertainment changed in Changel. In the 1930s there was enough common land in the village for some young people to set up a football field. They made up a team and challenged similar teams from neighbouring villages. Although the game was rudimentary, with the players merely tucking up their *dhoties* which they wore routinely, this version of barefoot soccer did bring about a certain cross-caste solidarity and even intensified the village identity. However, in due course, the land that comprised the football field was encroached upon and brought under the plough; the players grew up and the fun went out of football.

Some people then set up a smaller volleyball court in front of the Mahadev temple at the northern end of the village and Bachcha was an enthusiastic participant in clearing and levelling the land and drawing out the court. The enthusiasm lasted for several months and although no inter-village contests were staged, there were matches played between various teams from within Changel. One night, however, the person whose land lay next to the volleyball court decided that the sporting culture had impeded his agriculture. His family and he uprooted the poles, burnt the net and obliterated the markings on the ground. The next morning, the village woke up to find that once again there had been privatisation of the commons and volleyball was no longer the game played. In terms of sport now, the only activity is around a few carrom boards which are in private houses and, therefore

by definition, accessible only to people of particular caste and family groups.

Women's entertainment and social life was in any case conducted in small groups. The major occasions in this respect related to the rites of passage: births, sacred thread or tonsure ceremonies, marriages and so on. These enabled women to get together, gossip, tease each other and sing songs. The songs were traditional: *sohair* when a child was expected, *gosaun* in praise of the Mother Goddess and *samdaun* at the time of marriage. The latter included the heart-rending Maithil plaint, '*Kateko jatan sa hame Siyaji ke posalanhu, Tinako Raghubar neyne jaaye re* (I have brought up Sita with so much care and now she is being taken away by Ram)', referring to the *bidai* (departure) of Sita, the daughter of Mithila, on her marriage to Ram of Ayodhya. In course of time, the songs got 'modernised' with the influence of cinema, and even the traditional marriage rituals changed. While earlier the high point of the Maithil wedding was the *var parikshan* (examination of the groom to check him out for physical deformities or mental disabilities), following the phenomenal success of the Hind film *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, which has been watched by more than 6 crore people including a substantial number from Changel, Mithila started following Western Indian Marwari-Punjabi rituals like the '*Paise de do joote le lo!*' sequence in the film. Meanwhile, other community entertainment activities of women like *Sama*, during which dolls were played with and floats were released in the village ponds, decayed as the ponds dried up and the universal culture of the cinema overtook the local life of Changel.

Funerals too were major occasions for community action. The rites were conducted over several days and there were heated debates and even conflicts when some people attempted to abbreviate the mourning period from



thirteen to eleven days. Then, depending on the economic status of the bereaved, feasts had to be organised. Even the poorest had to feed several *brahmins*, the more affluent had to feed at least their own caste members and the rich had to feed the whole population of the village as well as that of neighbouring villages. Most such feasts were grand affairs with several courses offered to the guests and there was no difference in the menu in wedding and funeral feasts. In both cases, there was much activity, community cooking and a great deal of hullabaloo. Thus, it was not only the short average life expectancy that reduced grief in cases of death but the elaborate social ceremonies also helped curtail the sense of bereavement.

Even in these respects, however, the social content started getting less with time, and both simplification in the interest of economy or elaboration in keeping up with the culturally different Joneses represented by those of the world of films became the feature of Changel's life. Thus, although the village remained physically isolated and had only tenuous connections with the economic market, the cultural homogenisation which is the dominant tendency in the rest of India also started characterising Changel.

Bachcha found these phenomena both intriguing and worrying. He had no major cause for nostalgia; nevertheless he was uneasy about the cultural developments which seemed to unthinkingly obliterate the us-them distinction. This was so even though he himself was not sure about what constituted either 'us' or 'them' since there were so many parameters to each. As he went through life, gathering more and more social moss, the issue of definition of identity became even more complex.

Bachcha had his first experience of participating in a family funeral when his grandmother died. The memory of his great-grandmother's funeral, when a very large

number of the old lady's descendants had gathered, was dim in his mind since he had been only four years old then. But even before he came to Changel and was disgusted by the irrational ritualism, unnecessary expense and enormous wastage that marked his grandmother's funeral, Bachcha had moved on in life. From Patna, he had gone on to study in Delhi's St. Stephen's College. The enormities of India's capital city, the cultural differences from the patterns he had till then been used to, and even the fake cosmopolitanism, all served to simultaneously make him yearn for his roots as well as alienate him from them.

Delhi University in general, and St. Stephen's College in particular, were somewhat undeservedly famous institutions. While the living was much more sophisticated than anything Bachcha had experienced till then, academic pursuit was relatively simple. That left him enough time to participate in some debates and discussions and even the occasional demonstrations and strikes. These in turn drew him inexorably to the Delhi School of Economics with its galaxy of intellectuals and to the Marx Club which was run by some of the finest people in the University. This was the period of the Vietnam War, of the Cultural Revolution in China, of May '68, of *gheraos* and of Naxalbari. It was also the period of the Beatles, of Bob Dylan, of Joan Baez, of Regis Debre, of Franz Fanon, of Sartre, of Mao Dzedong, of Dara Singh films and of Ho Ho Chi Minh. It was the time between the success of Raj Kapoor's *Sangam* and the failure of his *Mera Naam Joker*, between the waning of Premchand and the rise of the self-conscious Little Magazines in Hindi, between Jawaharlal Nehru at his best and Indira Gandhi at her worst. It was an in-between time but it was not a twilight; it was more like the period between the deep night and the early dawn when the best dreams come to the simple



of heart. And Bachcha, away from his roots, was learning the complexity of simplicity.

One of the lessons that he learnt was that there were forces beyond his control and these forces were both natural and unnatural.



## *Vulnerability to Crisis*

*(circa 1930 to 1940)*

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CHANGEL'S CUP OF misery was filled to its brim and overflowed when a great natural calamity succeeded the economic and political. In 1934, Changel, like a large part of North Bihar, was shaken by a great earthquake. Almost all the houses were destroyed and, although there were no casualties as the houses were mainly of mud, tremendous hardship ensued. The destruction of dwellings, including that of the *Narmadeshwar Mahadev* the Shiva temple built around 1885, and the consequent trauma were compounded by the fact that the earthquake resulted in the churning of vast tracts of agricultural lands, converting them into practically uncultivable sandy wastes. The inaccessibility of Changel, lack of communication systems, etc. must have further troubled the villagers, worried for the safety of their migrant family members.

It was, in fact, the efforts of the migrants which ultimately saved the village. Many of them were in Muzaffarpur town when the earthquake took place and barely survived the debris from falling brick and concrete structures. But they did manage to extricate themselves from the mess and went back to Changel to help their



families and their village to get back on their feet again. No relief was forthcoming from the government. Even Mahatma Gandhi washed his hands of the affair, proclaiming that the earthquake was God's punishment to the people of Bihar for the sins they had committed. Whatever relief resources local Bihar Congressmen were able to mobilise after this damping statement from their supreme leader were woefully inadequate, and Changel was denied a share of even that on account of its inaccessibility. The *zamindars*, by and large, made no attempt to help and indeed carried on brutally collecting rent as if nothing had happened.

The great peasant leader Swami Sahajanand Saraswati protested about the callousness of the landlords, but Changel was too far off and too isolated to be affected by his call of non-payment of rent: '*Kaise logay malguzari, lathh hamara zindabad!* (How will you collect the rent as long as our *lathis*—sticks or staves—are powerful?!).'

Bachcha heard this story years later when he had started doing research on peasant movements and the personality of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati impressed him no end. The idea of a *sannyasi*, well versed in religious lore, dedicating his life towards organising a militant peasant movement was impressive enough: the combination of the traditional saffron robes of the mendicant in combination with the red flags of the peasants was intriguing. However, as Bachcha unravelled the complex relationship between the national movement which sought, as it were, to transcend class, and the overtly class-based organisation of *kisans*, the many facets of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati's personality attracted him more and more. He was prepared to overlook the Swami's somewhat simplistic radical theories and even excuse his initial casteist orientation as he organised the *bhumihars* to assert their *brahmin* origins. Bachcha was disappointed that such a great leader was relegated to the

footnotes of the conventional historiography of modern India and was irritated that his memory had largely been shorn of peasant radicalism and appropriated by status quoist *bhumihars*. Even the philosophically significant debate between the Swami and the Mahatma about the 1934 earthquake and similar natural calamities, with the former seeing these rationally and the latter attributing them to divine displeasure, had been almost forgotten when Bachcha began his research. In Changel, however, even illiterate peasants who had by then mythologised Gandhi recalled the stirring slogans with which Swami Sahajanand Saraswati had sought to mobilise *kisans*.

However, having no formal organisation like the Kisan Sabha, and deprived of institutional assistance, in 1934, Changel had to rely on internal resources and informal urban-rural linkages to cope with the devastation wrought by the earthquake. For those who had some source of cash income, the increased value of money helped. For others, the only resource was to use as much of the unpriced materials like mud, *khar* (reeds), etc. to rebuild their homes.

The sands thrown up at the southern end of the village forced the villagers to move to the inhabited area about 500 metres northwards so that some *dhanuk* and even *khatbey* houses came to be in the centre of the new village. A social churning thus followed the natural upheaval.

For many decades thereafter, there were hardly any tiled houses in the village as the cost of baked tiles was prohibitive, and only after another calamity, a fire, struck the village in 1962, did many people, who rebuilt their houses and those who had by then more family members with urban incomes, put tiles on their roofs. An incidental result of this was that for some decades there was little market for the produce of the village *kumhar* (potter, whose income was derived more from tile-making than pottery) and he, along with his family, had to migrate



from Changel to the market village of Laghwara-Pahsual, about eight kilometres away.

Interestingly, while the villagers had no resources to tile their own houses, they got the temple of *Narmadeshwar Mahadev* constructed anew as a small pucca structure. For this purpose and for the subsequent maintenance of the temple, several families transferred portions of land in the name of the deity. And thus legally God became a landlord in Changel. Such lands are known as *brahmottar* or *devottar* lands in the revenue records and their produce is enjoyed by the *pujari*, the *brahmin* priest who worships the deity.

Even more interestingly, part of the labour for the construction of the temple was contributed by a Muslim mason who put two 'Islamic' domes on top of the structure, designed it like a mosque with the prayer area facing west, and, as a lasting reminder of eclectic *shraddha* (reverence), signed his name under a suitable invocation in Urdu on the southern wall. This was when the split between the Congress and the Muslim League was taking serious shape elsewhere, and only a few years before the demand for Pakistan was raised! In Changel and its neighbouring villagers, communalism had still not reared its ugly head.

The process of recovery after the earthquake (which was so severe that people still date events by the year of its occurrence) took many years and many shapes. In agriculture itself, as the earthquake had rendered some of the lands unfit for paddy cultivation, after leaving the portion fallow for some years, tentative attempts were made to grow wheat. It succeeded in some measure but for many years wheat remained exclusively a cash crop. As late as 1955, when a flood destroyed the paddy crop but there was a good wheat harvest, very few people knew how to eat wheat. There were only two houses in the village which had the *chakla-belana* (wooden platform and rolling pin) to be able to make *soharis* (thin-rolled

*chapattis* or *rotis*). Most other cooked the wheat as they would have cooked rice and ate it as a porridge or gruel, and did not relish it.

In the 1930s, however, wheat proved to be a great blessing as it brought in much-needed cash income for the landed and additional days of employment for the landless. Mustard, grown along with wheat, was another new crop that came in during this period and Bakuchi, the twin village of Katra (the police station), became important for Changel as an improved oil-press was set up there.

There were some interesting side-effects to the setting up of the oil press. People from far and wide started sending their oilseeds to Bakuchi for oil extraction since not only was the yield higher there but it was also believed that the oil that came out was purer. This made many village *telis* (oil pressers and traders) redundant. However, since they had experience of commodity production and exchange, they did not go into penury; instead they diversified into other areas of trade albeit on a petty scale. Many of the *telis* became the village *banias* (shopkeepers) who stocked and sold various items of necessary use like salt, cloth, exotic spices, soap, sugar and, in due course, even such luxuries as tea. Since their inventories were slow-moving and many transactions were carried out not through the medium of money but by barter using the *becha* system, these grocery stores were not very profitable concerns and what profit was to be made was through moneylending or through adulterating the commodities that were sold.

Indeed, it was this last aspect that introduced perhaps the first branded product into the general rural market in Changel. That was Dalda, the famous hydrogenated vegetable oil marketed by Lever Bros. Dalda, which was given the inaccurate Hindi generic name of '*vanaspati*', was used as a cheap substitute for *desi ghee*, home-made



clarified butter. It increased the availability of fat to the relatively poorer sections of the village but it also spawned a whole mythology. It came to be believed in Changel, as elsewhere, that Dalda could never give those who used it the strength that *ghee*-eaters had. Thus, village *pahalwans*, the *zamindars* and male offspring continued to be given *ghee* even though Dalda and hydrogenated vegetable oils with other, lesser known and infrequently used, brand names became more and more popular on account of their cheapness. The popularity of the best-known *vanaspati* brand was such that it gave rise to simple infantile riddles:

*Teen akshar ka mera naam  
Ulta seedha ek samaan*

'My name is made of three letters (of the Hindi alphabet) which read the same when juggled around.' The answer was Dalda!

Dalda, white sugar and salt brought in from outside the village also changed concepts of purity and pollution regarding food. Machine-made food obviously did not have the ritual status that traditional items enjoyed and for years their inclusion in the daily diet was resisted by those who could afford to do so. It was widely believed that animal bones were used by mills to bleach sugar and thus *gur* or crystalline *misri* were preferred, at least for religious purposes. Similarly, salt too was measured on the purity scale: the most pure was obviously that which was produced locally but even salt mined in north India's salt ranges was acceptable as 'natural'. The latter was called *sendha namak* or *sonha noon*, mined salt. Even after the Partition of India, that item continued to be imported into Changel, although in much reduced quantities, and got a new name, *Pakistani namak* or *Lahori noon*. This form of salt was obviously not iodized and iodine deficiency

was obvious among the villagers: it showed up in ugly goitres, *ghegh*, which even the heaviest *hansuli* could not hide. The worst cases of iodine deprivation even led to cretinism and the victims were subject to the cruelty and callousness towards the handicapped which is a feature of rural idiocy.

There was, of course, neither public health care nor even private medical attention available anywhere near Changel. Such treatment as was accessible to most people was provided by the village witch-doctor, the *ojha*, or the *chamain* or midwife. Both practiced a combination of mumbo-jumbo and the more esoteric of traditional remedies which supplemented the home cures which every housewife knew. Herbs, leaves and starvation formed the basis of such medical attention and when surgery was required, the village barber could be called upon to exercise his skills. That life was not only nasty and brutish but, on an average, also short, was no surprise.

Bachcha learnt all these as he grew up in the village. He also experienced how the community operated in meeting natural calamities. Mutual help in extinguishing fires, for instance, was common and immediate and it was not altruism that brought it about but individual self-interest since the fire could easily spread, if unchecked, from one thatched house to another. Similarly, quarantining people with contagious diseases was also widely practised although it was done on account of superstition rather than science. Small pox, for example, was widely feared and Sitala Mai, its terrible goddess, was sought to be appeased through any method possible. The most successful was keeping the affected person quarantined and burning *neem* leaves around him. Despite these measures, however, small pox was a major scourge and the large number of those who were afflicted is still testified to by the elderly who bear its marks.

The one feature which saved Changel on many



occasions was the fact that so many of its people were migrants. Not only did disease have a differential impact on those inside the village and outside but the migrants also helped people in the village get access to modern medicine in the Darbhanga Medical College at Laheriasarai or even at the Prince of Wales Medical College and Hospital at Patna. Besides, these migrants also brought in new seeds and crops which supplemented the traditional foods whose supply was disrupted by nature from time to time. One of the agricultural innovations sought to be introduced into Changel by the migrants was the cultivation of maize, *makai*, during the lean summer season. The crop was so new that it had to be popularised through exotic Bhojpuri song:

*Makaia re tohar gun gailon na jaa laa*  
*Aagey aagey har chale, peeche se boala*  
*Tekra pachhe henga chale*  
*Teen ber sohala*  
*Makaia re tohar gun gailon na jaa laa*

'O maize, I cannot sing enough praise to you. First the land is ploughed, then it is levelled, (and the seeds are sown) and the crop is weeded thrice. Then you come, you whose praise I cannot sing in full.'



## *Changing Prospects*

*(circa 1940 to 1950)*

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BUT, WHEN THE big earthquake hit the village, these new crops did not help the people of Changel as much as a renewed bout of migration. Formal school education was still a long way from the village, but lower and upper schools had started coming up in nearby villages. More *kayastha* boys were therefore beginning to learn English of sorts. They started going out of the village in search of jobs in a big way. Some became *munshis*, *patwaris* and *amins*; others found employment in non-traditional professions. A few reached the fringes of the bureaucracy, becoming *najayaz babus* (unofficial functionaries in government organisations; literally, improper clerks, who performed some of the functions of official appointees on a commission from the illegal gratifications received by the 'owners' of the concerned positions). Only after Independence did some people from Changel join the bureaucracy proper, selected for government service in their own right and merit. Some others became schoolmasters, even in distant parts of Nepal.

The most adventurous, Harivansh Narayan, went away to Burma, then a part of British India, and took up a



variety of jobs there. Others, less daring, reached Darbhanga, where the newly established Medical College in Laheriasarai in the British part of the town (distinct from the part run by the Darbhanga *zamindari* known as the Raj) gave them opportunities of becoming part of the world of modern medicine. Not even one could become a doctor although there was, and is, a great demand for practitioners of modern medicine; it is only in the last decade of the 20th century that two boys from Changel have become full-fledged doctors but both are, at least at present, working outside the village. However, even earlier, at least three persons from Changel became ward-helpers, compounders or male nurses. One rose so high as to work for many years as a 'Sister', and then retired in 1975 with the exalted status of 'Matron'. This accidental entry into modern medical establishment has an unfortunate consequence, for Changel now has no less than four 'doctors' (quacks: retired/dismissed nurses or compounders), who practise their skills on the hapless population with grave consequences for their patients but at substantial profit to themselves.

In the early 1960s, a boy from Changel did join medical college but, while still in his first year, he married a nurse. As the woman was not only from outside the caste but a Christian to boot, the boy was excommunicated and his family withdrew financial support. Consequently, he had to give up his studies and became a medical helper, and was later promoted to a dispenser. A sign of change in the village is that now both he and his wife are accepted, albeit reluctantly, as a part of the community. For ritual purposes, he is still an outcaste (thus he could not perform his father's funeral) but as he is now a man of some means, he has been able to somewhat rehabilitate himself in the economic and even social life of the village.

In addition to these non-traditional sources of employment for young men from Changel, there arose

two others in the late 1930s: one was jobs in industries in Calcutta and in plantations in Assam; and the other, during the expanded recruitment drives in the Second World War period, was in the armed forces. Jobs in the modern industrial sector, mostly as casual labour or contracted construction workers, were taken up by several *dhanuks* from Changel who established, in due course, a regular channel of seasonal migration of agricultural labourers to distant parts. On the other side, some *kayastha* young men, notable among them being the same adventurous Harivansh Narayan, joined the armed forces, he in the air force and the others in the infantry. One *yadava* also joined the army but as a cook-cum-bearer. Most of the others too were not in the fighting branches; some had clerical jobs whereas others became medical attendants. But altogether, these new migrants from Changel represented a qualitatively new phase in its integration with the outside world. Many of them went away for long periods and, ultimately, some even took their immediate families with them. Regular remittances stopped coming from them after some years, and when money was sent, it was often by postal money order.

There being no post office in the village, even though its population already numbered nearly 2,000, some difficulty was faced on this account as postal transactions were carried out through the post office at Janakpur Road on the Nepal border near Pupri. It was only in 1962 that a temporary post office (later upgraded to full-fledged status) was established in Changel. A new feature came along with it in the shape of the postmaster using moneys received through postal remittance to augment his income through short-term, high-interest moneylending.

In the early 1940s, however, the establishment of a post office was still a long way off in the future and communication with the outside world was still mainly in person. This was facilitated, to an extent, by the



construction of a *katcha* (mud-paved) road which linked Benibad on the Darbhanga-Muzaffarpur Road and Runni-Saidpur on the Sitamarhi-Muzaffarpur Road. The *katcha* Benibad-Saidpur track passed through Katra where the police station was located and although it bypassed Changel by four kilometres, it made travel by bullock-cart, palanquin (locally called *kharkaria*, *doli* or *palki*) or on mare (*ghori*)—modes of transport used by the *zamindars* and the other well-to-do villagers—or even on foot or bicycle much easier than before. It was only following the disturbances during the Quit India Movement in 1942 when *gora sipahis* (white soldiers) went past in trucks, that motorised transport was first seen or its sounds heard in the villages in the vicinity of Changel.

In 1950, a bus (*larie*, lorry) service started on the road with a ramshackle Chevrolet army-surplus vehicle painfully goaning its way daily between Katra and Runni-Saidpur. It had a first class, the bench on which the driver sat, reserved for the *bhalmanus* (*bhadralok*, gentlefolk); a second class, a bench behind the driver where the up-coming passengers could buy status though not much comfort; and a third class, where the passengers were piled in along with their luggage, the occasional goat, and *dahi* (curds, yoghurt) which was thick enough to be carried for sale tied in cloth but which left a rancid smell nevertheless. A mandatory bath at the end of *larie*-journey was thus not only an exercise of ritual and caste purification but also a hygienic necessity. In 1952, one of the villagers of Changel who had become a government official, brought to the village, across the rough fields, along the well-worn bullock-cart tracks and through the waters of Pahal, a jeep. That marked the end of the absolute reliance on human or animal power which had characterised Changel till then. The significance of this technological leap cannot be minimised.

In 1963, the Benibad-Saidpur Road was paved and

macadamised and several buses, including one run by the Bihar Steel State Road Transport Corporation, started plying on it up to Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga. In the early 1980s, when the Ganga bridge was opened, connecting north Bihar with the capital city of Patna by road, a tremendous transport boom took place in Bihar in general. Vast hordes started travelling to Patna to hang around the proliferating bureaucracy and pursuing litigation in the High Court. To meet their transport needs was a profitable avenue of investment in a state where there were otherwise few investment opportunities outside the traditional sectors, and large transport empires run by former landlords, contractors and politicians emerged. The extent of their market penetration has been such that in 1985 even Changel (which still does not have a completed pucca road, the nearest motorable track being four kilometres away) started being serviced, albeit from some distance, by a Yajuar-Patna daily 'VDO (Video) Coach'. Changel may not have emerged out of the 18th century otherwise, but at least, in a few respects, it has started striding into the 21st!

The inexorable march into the future also came with the introduction of television into the village. Since the mid-1960s, the village had a few radio sets which had replaced the solitary gramophone, or *fonogiraph* as it was called, as the instrument of rural entertainment. Indeed, people in the village had got so used to listening to records that when they heard the very first radio broadcast—a *gramin bhaiyon ka karyakram* (programme for rural brothers), *Chaupal*, featuring a Magahi (Magadhi)-speaking Masterjee, a Maithili-speaking Panditji, a Bhojpuri-speaking Loha Singh and a Hindi-speaking Mukhiyaji—the entire audience demanded that it be replayed! The first radio sets were cumbersome contraptions with valves which took their time heating up before the sound came. Although the sets had long



antennae strung up on bamboos, their largely *betar* (wireless) nature mystified the villagers who thought that the Hindi name for All India Radio, *Aakashvani*, was not only literal but even recalled the voice of the gods as in the many mythological stories that they had been told. Later, however, the instrument was somewhat de-mystified when the transistor revolution took place and returnee migrant labourers started carrying portable radios inside the village and even when they went *maidan-disha* (towards the fields) to answer the call of nature.

The coming of TV to Changel was yet another gigantic step in its globalisation: practically the whole village would gather together reverentially before the generator-operated set (since the village still does not have power and even petrol for the generator has to be fetched from a pump nearly 20 kilometres away.) This was a regular occurrence every Sunday morning when the epic teleserials *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* were shown and a new ritual took shape in Changel. The set itself became an idol of sorts and the medium was definitely the message in this 'globalised' village where devotion to advertisements was matched by reverence for the actors in the serials. The electronic religiosity did not displace traditional worship but only supplemented the layers of superstition which had existed from the time of the *Gora Raj* and earlier.

At the time of Independence, however, Changel hardly showed any evidence of the progress and modernisation achieved under two centuries of Pax Britannica. On the contrary, the Permanent Settlement and its various ramifications had bled the peasantry. Sub-infeudation and complicated tenurial arrangements had led to social strife and costly litigation. Poverty had driven large numbers of the village youth to look for livelihood outside without much hope of making good even there. The village economic average was perhaps worse than when Dullah Ram had 'founded' it and the poor had reached almost

absolutes of poverty.

However, on 15 August 1947, when, along with the rest of India, Changel found itself freed of the *Gora Raj*, *diyas* (earthen lamps) were lighted by those who could afford the oil and others waved *luttis* (lighted twigs) to usher in Freedom, and perhaps even Hope. Communal madness, which otherwise marred the event in the cities, towns and even some rural areas, left Changel untouched, and the Muslim tenants (settled during the short-lived *zamindari* of the Patna Nawab) in the Neudu *tola* (hamlet) of Changel did not feel threatened. Indeed, only a few months later, when news came of the assassination of Gandhi, the whole village kept a fast and performed his *shradhh* even though they had heard only vaguely about Ganhi Baba. Until today, from villages in roughly a 20-kilometre radius of Changel, there is talk of only one person (not family) who migrated to Pakistan. By an astounding coincidence, when a person from Changel ran across this migrant in Peshawar in 1979, he received overwhelming hospitality as would be extended to a long-lost kinsman, an *ilaka bhai* (brother from one's region) if not a co-religionist!

Bachcha had a particular reason to remember that the country's Independence was important to his very being. Even before he became aware of the birds and the bees, he was informed that his family had decided that no new child should be born under conditions of national slavery. Thus, his very birth was linked to Freedom and it was this familial determination that, mercifully, prevented him from becoming a Midnight's Child.

Bachcha's family was curiously both intensely political as well as apolitical. His grandfather had participated enthusiastically in the freedom struggle, for years giving up his profession as a lawyer, and had followed Gandhi blindly. He had denounced untouchability and had scandalised the village by even making friends with



Muslims from neighbouring villages. At the same time, he remained an orthodox Hindu; never eating anything which was not cooked in his own house, not even going to caste feasts. When he travelled, he had his *kharwas* carry *dahi* and *chura* (pounded rice) from home and never stepped inside a hotel or restaurant. Much of this he attributed to the teachings of Gandhi.

Bachcha's grandmother was less concerned about the Mahatma and more about the fact that parts of the family's properties were auctioned off because of her husband's political proclivities. Nevertheless, she empathised entirely with the anti-untouchability attitudes and, if there was an element of patronage and even self-interest in befriending the labourers, it was either not noticed or, in any case, not overtly resented.

Bachcha's father was initially, as a student, deeply involved in the national movement and enthusiastically took part in *prabhat ferries* in Muzaffarpur. However, when he joined government service after Independence, he confined his political interest to reading all the political news that he came across in newspapers and magazines as thoroughly as possible. He led a deliberately apolitical life but, since his sympathies remained with the Congress, there was no political disagreement between him and his father.

By contrast, there was intense political debate in Bachcha's mother's natal home. His maternal grandfather was a doughty school headmaster who continued to cycle the ten kilometres to his school every day for 60 years—30 when he was in service and 30 even after he retired. Although he had not participated actively in the national movement, he considered himself a thorough Congressman and wore *khadi* from the time he had heard Gandhi extol its virtues. His son, however, was not so impressed by either Congress or even the Mahatma and became a Socialist. His hero was Jaya Prakash Narayan and his

immediate leader was Rambrikskha Benipuri, the Hindi writer who made the nearby village of Benibad famous. Bachcha's maternal uncle and his friends did not actually do much work among the peasants, but then generally, too, the Socialists were more generous with words and slogans than with actual action. Nevertheless, they had helped Jaya Prakash Narayan when he had escaped from prison in 1942 and were also peripherally involved with the Nepal *Satyagraha* in which Karpoori Thakur, a Socialist from Samastipur, had played an important role. Since the political views of Bachcha's *nana* (maternal grandfather) and *mama* (maternal uncle) differed sharply, there was always a lively debate going on and Bachcha enjoyed the cut and thrust whenever he visited Budhkara, his maternal village, about 12 kilometres from Changel.

These influences, perhaps combined with the early exposure to Communist thought in nursery school, shaped Bachcha's own politics. These got more crystallised through discussion with the Jesuit *padres* in school regarding the belief in the Biblical Genesis when confronted by the logic of the Darwinian theory of evolution. One *padre* told him that the godless Karl Marx had dedicated his *Das Kapital* to Charles Darwin and that made Marxism irrationally fascinating. Later, some reading and more discussions, some reasoning and more romanticism, led Bachcha on to Naxalism. But that still lay in the future and Changel was the part of his continuum which till then only spanned the past and the present.





# Post-Independence

## (circa 1950 to 1970)

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A BIG CHANGE was to come about in Changel in the years following Independence. There was talk that *zamindari* would be abolished. Rumours to this effect electrified the better-off among the tenants and there was a rush to pay *malguzari* (rent) so that receipts, which were proof of occupation, could be obtained. The *zamindars*, most of whom held extremely petty estates, were, on the other hand, greatly perturbed about this development especially as it was compounded by talk of the abolition of *bataidari*, imposition of land ceiling etc. Word reached the village of *bhoodan* (voluntary land gift for eventual distribution to the landless) initiated by a disciple of Gandhi called Vinoba Bhave. Some landowners took recourse to nominal *bhoodan* to save their holdings, as even then they felt that there would not be much real redistribution. Others carried out a number of fictitious (*benami*) transfers to reduce their legal liabilities. The *zamindars* of Dhanaur, for instance, transferred some of their lands to their *yadava* retainers, only to regret their actions years later when their trusted *benami*-holders refused to part with the lands registered in their names.

In most cases, however, transfers were made to relatives by marriage: daughters, sisters, etc. who remained 'sleeping proprietors'. There was a rush to record these transactions at the Land Registration Office at Katra and even at Muzaffarpur, and the few lawyers from the village and their *munshis* (clerks) did good business in the early years after Independence.

Ultimately, *zamindari* was abolished after a prolonged process of legal battles and legislative filibustering launched by the richer *zamindars* of Bihar, but not before the newly adopted Constitution itself was amended after an adverse Supreme Court verdict. This protracted legislative process gave the *zamindars* ample opportunity to 'manage' the unsettling of the Permanent Settlement. In any case, the landlords were given compensation in the form of *zamindari* bonds for which a regular, though depressed, market developed in due course. Other land reform legislation was also enacted but implementation was not at all vigorous and the net change in Changel was that *zamindars* were removed from their formal position in the land-ownership structure, the position of occupancy tenants was marginally strengthened and noises were heard of impending measures to benefit the poor. But mostly the village carried on as before.

In one respect, however, there was a marked difference in the rest of India and it had an indirect effect even on Changel. Post-Independence planning resulted in the state taking up a number of large-scale public works like road-building, dam-raising and the construction of mammoth flood-control measures, such as the Kosi and Gandak embankment systems. A great deal of labour was required for these, and the skilled earth-workers among the *khatbeys* of Changel started going regularly during the agricultural off-season for employment on these projects. When it became clear that the demand for skilled and unskilled manual labour of this sort was constant, the seasonal



exodus started being regulated through the agency of a labour contractor, an enterprising *kayastha*, who employed a muscled *yadava* as the head of his labour gang which he started taking to places as far off as Nirmal in the Kosi and even up to Assam where the National Highway was being constructed. Although the *kayastha thikadar* (contractor) and the *yadava* mate (foreman) appropriated a part of the wages of the *khatbey* and some *dhanuk* labourers, the poorest sections had an avenue of earning outside the village for the first time in the history of Changel. At the work-sites, although the caste and other ritual hierarchies were maintained among the villagers from Changel, the labourers had their first view of the world outside, a world where the cash nexus seemed to be more important than the patron-client relationships that they had been accustomed to. The public works opened up a new vista for the poor people of Changel, although their own village benefited only through the small amounts of money they managed to save and bring back when they returned.

In fact, the proliferation of uncoordinated public works proved to be disastrous for Changel in the late 1950s and 1960s. As dams and embankments were built at great speed and road network started criss-crossing the north Bihar countryside, the natural flow of water was severely impeded. Post-monsoon water-logging became the rule and Changel, in any case located in a topographical trough, suffered immensely as paddy cultivation became impossible. Every year the field would be ploughed and made ready in May and June, the seedlings grown and transplanted when the rains came, and then would come the devastating floods. Earlier, too, the area used to get flooded but, as the water cleared after a few days, leaving behind a rich deposit of silt, the floods had proved beneficial. Now, the water tended to stay, resulting in the rotting of the newly-planted seedlings. And when the

water evaporated or was eventually drained away, people further in the north and west, even more affected by water-logging because their villages were nearer the large public works obstructing the water flow, would cut the embankments and roads, and the second set of seedlings, which had been planted in Changel at great cost and at considerable rise in indebtedness, would be flooded again.

As yields and total production fell, the peasants were convinced of the truth of their ancient saying about the result of late paddy cultivation. One saying warned:

*Adra dhan, punarbas paiya*  
*Gel kisan je boe chiraiya*

'Paddy sown in *adra* turns to plenty, in *punarbas* (the subsequent asterism) it has empty ears, and if a farmer sows paddy in *chiraiya* (or *pukh*, the asterism after *punarbas*), he is finished.'

If sowing was delayed, as happened for several years running in Changel on account of water-logging, the peasants were sure their efforts would go to waste:

*Kusi amawas chauthi chan*  
*Aab ki ropada dhan kisan*

'After the *Kusi Amawas* (the festival on the fifteenth day of *Bhadhon*, on which *brahmins* dig *kus*-grass) and the *Chaur Chann* (*Chaturth Chandrama*—fourth day of the moon) festival (on the 19th day of *Bhadon* when the moon is worshipped with offerings of curds and bananas), O cultivator! You need not plant out paddy.'

In Changel, sowing was delayed beyond *Chaur Chann* because of the persistent flooding of the soil, and the results were disastrous. This tale continued for almost a decade and resulted in output falling to such an extent that, in the mid-1960s, the village saw famine for the first



time in its history. The famine had important consequences for the social and political structure.

While Changel had remained relatively insulated against the deep forces that were changing the wider world politically, there had been some kind of Congress politics in the village since the beginning of the 20th century. Like Bachcha's maternal uncle, some of the young men in Changel and in neighbouring villages had come under the charismatic spell of Jaya Prakash Narayan (JP) who had romantically escaped from jail during the Quit India Movement and gone underground for a while in villages around Changel. On the eve of Independence, while these young followers of JP joined the Socialist Party, the older people continued to be passive followers of the Congress. The mass of the population, the agricultural labourers, poor peasants, many political landowners and almost all the women, remained outside party politics but generally went along with the Congress. There were a few pro-British 'loyalists' among the bigger *zamindars* who were anti-Congress but after Independence they too jumped onto the Congress bandwagon. Neither the Kisan Sabha nor the Communist had been particularly active in Changel or its immediate neighbourhood, but there had been some peasant and trade union movements led by the Sabhaites and the Communist Party of India (CPI) in other parts of Muzaffarpur and the neighbouring Darbhanga districts.

Thus, in the first general election after Independence, the people of Changel essentially had the choice between the Congress and a small Socialist group. There were, however, other complications.

Since the Congress candidate for the Bihar Assembly was a petty *bhumihar* landlord-cum-lawyer from a neighbouring village, the landed elements (and on their persuasion, their clients) would ordinarily have had no hesitation in voting for him. But, the *zamindars* were

unhappy with the anti-*zamindari* legislation introduced by the Congress Party. The *bhumihars*, who tended to support the Congress Party, were unhappy with its revenue minister, K.B. Sahay, who was the main architect of the anti-*zamindari* legislation. On the other side, the *kayastha* petty *zamindars* were not very pleased with the local Congress candidate, but were pro-Sahay who was a *kayastha*. The Socialists had thrown a *yadava* as their candidate into the fray, but were calling for support in the name of JP who too was a *kayastha*. Thus, there was intense campaigning as ordinary villagers prepared to exercise their franchise for the 'bullocks' (Congress) and the 'banyan tree' (Socialist) election symbols. The landowners or potential landowners were appealed to through the bullocks, which symbolised agriculture, while the Socialists tried to woo the landless to cast their vote for the tree symbol, as they often had to spend nights under trees. In the end, the lure of land proved to be strong and the Congress ditty of '*Bhiya kisanma ho bailwa ke jori na bhulai* (Brother peasants, ensure that the pair of bullocks is not forgotten)' won the day.

Utterly disappointed at their electoral rout, the Socialists abjured politics and some joined in the *sarvodaya-bhoodan* campaigns and started *ambar charkha* spinning centres. One such centre functioned in Changel for a while and provided some income to the poor widows among the higher castes. On the whole, the attempts of the followers of JP did not make much impact, and they kept aloof generally, resurfacing in politics only in the early 1970s when the Naxalite Movement, centred around Musahari, near Muzaffarpur, threatened to disturb the agrarian status quo, even in remote Changel. But well before that, the Congress had consolidated its hold, with the difference that the hold of the old *zamindars* belonging to the upper castes had started weakening, and the emergent new rich peasantry from among the former occupancy *raiya*ts,



generally also from the intermediate castes like the *yadavas*, started getting more powerful.

This was reflected in Changel too where the social and economic hold of the *kayasthas* was weakened and in the newly formed *panchayats* (institutions of local self-government) the *yadavas* tended to dominate on the basis of superior muscle-power. Booth-capturing came to Changel as a feature of electoral politics around 1967.

From *zamindari* abolition to the famine in 1966-67, relative economic and political positions in the village had undergone some change. As already described, there had been some rearrangement of landed property prior to, and following, the land reform legislation. It had not benefited the rural poor but had resulted in the fragmentation of economic resources and power, and the strengthening of the position of the occupancy tenants, among whom were the *yadavas*. Also, while others were migrating from the village for either long or short durations, the *yadavas* and most *noniyas* stayed put. This had important consequences. As paddy cultivation declined in the village on account of water-logging, wheat became a major crop. But wheat required a very different labour organisation from the one to which the village was accustomed. For one, it was much more labour-intensive, needing periodic irrigation, weeding and even the spreading of chemical fertilisers. The process of threshing was also more efficient if carried out with the aid of mechanical instruments, rather than manually or through animal-power. Thus, it was also a more capital-intensive crop requiring greater personal supervision.

The *kayasthas* in the village, many of whose menfolk had migrated from the village for long-term jobs, did not have the 'man-power' to carry out efficient wheat cultivation and continued with paddy agriculture based increasingly on the *batai* system. On the other hand, the *dhanuks* and *khatbeys* also had migrants and, in any case,

did not have the initial resources to invest in the new agriculture. The *yadavas* and some *noniyas*, intermediate in the economic as well as caste hierarchy, were generally resident cultivators, and had also augmented their resources somewhat by diversifying from their traditional *ghee* trade (in the case of the *yadavas*) by buying cream-separating apparatus to sell unprocessed cream and buttermilk which had a faster turnover than *ghee*, and by becoming village-based recruiting agents for labour contractors (in the case of some *noniyas*).

These two sets of people also did not have caste taboos on direct participation in agriculture and were thus among the first to take advantage of the wheat-based Green Revolution which started affecting Changel in the mid-1960s, very hesitantly at first, but aided by the setting up of a Block Development Office originally at Aurai and then at Katra. The Green Revolution did not take off on account of several factors: inadequate arrangements for irrigation, bureaucratic corruption and sloth in supply of various inputs, the skewed land distribution pattern, the still-prevalent *bataidari* system, high levels of indebtedness merely to meet consumption needs on the part of a vast section of the population, and so on. Those who took to new crops did benefit to an extent, but the others tended to lose out.

An interesting reflection of the change from traditional paddy-based agriculture to high-yielding-variety (HVY) wheat cultivation is, ironically, in the election ditty of the CPI. Before the Green Revolution made its first appearance in Bihar, the party used to woo voters with its election symbol of 'sickle-and-sheaf-of-grain' and the song:

*Cham-cham chamke hasua pyara, jhume bali dhan ki  
Jai ho isi nisaan, jai majdoor-kisan ki*

'The sickle sparkles and the sheaf of paddy sways: victory to this symbol, victory to the workers and peasants!'



After wheat cultivation became more widespread, the party symbol remained the same but the words of the song were changed from *dhan* (paddy) to *Sona Kalyan* (HYV wheat) retaining the rhyme but changing the appeal:

*Cham-cham chamke hasua pyara, jhume bali Sona Kalyan ki  
Jai ho isi nisaan ki, jai sampanna kisan ki!*

At the end of the 1960s, however, the Green Revolution was still in the future and the situation continued to be in flux. The famine of 1966-67 had, for the first time in Changel's history, seen the distribution of government relief, albeit with a great deal of corruption and discrimination. Very occasionally, bureaucrats had started making brief appearances in the village. The *daroga* and constables from Katra were more frequent visitors as tensions around land exacerbated into fights and *fouzdari* (criminal) cases accompanied civil litigation. A school building was constructed to impart education to village children up to class three after which they had to go to the upper, middle and high schools in other villages. But the schoolmaster did not relish being posted to isolated Changel and was generally noticed only through his absence. The post office, mentioned earlier, was opened and only once was an inspection made when there were complaints regarding the postmaster defalcating money for private moneylending and even on that occasion caste solidarity came to his rescue in the form of temporary loans from his clansmen against handnotes to meet the deficit.

Caste feeling and solidarity were also emerging in the form of the *yadavas* talking of the 'backward' caste group led by them and including the *noniyas* and the *dhanuks*, distinct from the *kayastha-brahmin* 'forwards' on the one side, and the untouchables (the words Harijans and Dalit had not found currency in Changel) on the other. In

general elections and *panchayat* polls, voting increasingly followed caste patterns, with a *yadava* emerging as the *sarpanch* (executive head of the *panchayat*) in 1967, even as the *kayasthas* were still precariously holding on to the post of *mukhiya* (formal head).

*Panchayat* positions were coveted as it was realised that there was money involved, not only in the form of developmental funds made available by the state, but also through 'consideration money' for issuing permits for urea (and other fertilisers, kerosene and even sugar for ceremonial occasions. In one of the *panchayat* struggles between the *yadavas* and the *brahmins* (their candidate being a descendant of the learned *pandit* who had blessed the 'founding' of the village and whose progeny were held in great reverence by all of the villagers for many generations), the election was settled outside the polling booths in favour of the *yadava* candidate by the simple expedient of striking the *brahmin* candidate a few *lathi* blows, thus rendering the latter *hors de combat*!

In Bihar politics in general, the upper-caste, Congress monopoly of power was first broken in 1967 through the emergence of significant 'backward' lobbies both inside and outside the Congress; in the same period Changel, too, was falling in step with the general political march of the state. Later, the phenomenon of Bihar marching forward behind the Backwards got institutionalised and the arithmetic of elections made it apparent that only candidates who belonged to the intermediate castes had any chance of representing the people of Changel and its neighbouring villages in the state's legislature and the nation's Parliament, as long as polling meant voting for one's caste.

Not that this political change affected the material situation of the people of Changel. No electoral goodies came their way and such which were sent by leaders outside were grabbed on their way by various layers of



political intermediaries. Neither rule of law at the national macro level nor the exercise of democracy in the state, nor even the operation of grassroots republicanism through the institutionalised *panchayat* system, seemed to have any effect.

Even the long-needed bridge over the Pahal was never built although it was promised repeatedly and the site was surveyed several times. Once or twice, the material for the bridge was also brought and dumped there. However, Changel did not have as much political clout as other villages and the material was taken away to build other bridges. At one time it seemed that the construction might actually begin since the contract was given to the wife of the minister for rural development but eventually it turned out that even the combined influence of the couple was not sufficient and the project was postponed.

The operation of the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, administered by the *panchayat*, was also dismal. For one, no *panchayat* elections took place in Bihar for two decades and these supposed grassroots democratic bodies remained unrepresentative and powerless. Besides, the very limited nature of the resources made available to them made for cut-throat competition to appropriate what was provided. And, since the social surplus was extremely limited, accumulation became more and more primitive.

One instance of this was the emergence of the phenomenon of groom-kidnapping. Changel did experience too much of the practice of kidnapping eligible young men, and getting them forcibly married without paying the exorbitant dowry demanded, from the fathers of brides. However, it became endemic in the neighbouring village of Baigana, dominated by the dowry-afflicted *bhumihar* caste, where a whole profession of groom kidnappers developed. The curious part was that such forced marriages survived. There were two reasons for this. For one, the sanctity of the marriage ritual, *sindurdaan*

(the gift of vermillion), was such that even reluctant husbands did not generally want to take the risk of going to hell for having jilted their legally married wives. Secondly, to make sure that the kidnapped grooms did not develop second thoughts about marital fidelity after the ceremony, the contract for kidnapping included a guarantee for ensuring good behaviour for some years after the marriage. Thus, by and large, the institution of marriage was maintained even as it added to the accumulation process.

Another variant of the process of primitive accumulation was through outright loot. Till the 1970s, Changel and the area around it did not experience serious crime. There might have been occasional petty thefts and burglaries or the rarer *sendhmaries*, break-ins. Once in while, there were domestic fights and violence between brothers over the division of property. However, these were not looked at with alarm. The picture changed after 1980. The slowing down of economic growth blocked off legitimate modes of social advancement and, necessarily, primitive accumulation asserted itself once more as it was realised not only that crime pays but that crime alone pays. Some of the unemployed and unemployable youth in Changel and its neighbourhood took to banditry as a mode of bettering their economic prospects. The first bomb ever to burst in Changel was in 1987 and several dacoities were carried out. One dacoity even led to a gruesome murder. An innocent bystander to one such dacoity recognised the perpetrators as his companions with whom he smoked *ganja* and hailed them as his friends. The friends, however, did not want the recognition and therefore decided to silence him. They hacked him into several pieces. Violent crime introduced itself to Changel.

One of the leaders of one of the dacoit gangs, Nawab, a Muslim from Neudu *tola*, went on to bigger things. He



realised that without politicisation, criminality would remain petty. He therefore started serving political leaders outside the area and seeking their patronage. In due course, he worked his way up so that he became a part of the inner circle of a Congress bigwig with secular pretensions. This enabled him to get protection from the police and allowed him to expand his activities both in terms of variety and geographical spread. From rural brigandry, he progressed to booth-capturing and kidnapping for ransom, and operated not only in Changel but also in Patna and even Delhi. This became the cause of his undoing.

The growing power of this hoodlum was resented by leaders of other *bhumihar* and *yadava* gangs and they combined to cut him down to size. However, they realised soon enough that the combination of crime and politics was far more potent than mere muscle power. Thwarted in their local attempts, they too therefore decided to seek political backing and the *yadavas* in particular were successful in their efforts. The awesome might of the state was unleashed on this inconvenient lumpen and he was driven out of the area under the threat of otherwise meeting a violent end in an encounter with the forces of law and order. He escaped to Delhi and sought to operate there but the rural hick could not cope with the sophistication of urban crime. He was finally arrested in the nation's capital, taken to Bihar and mysteriously gunned down in a curious jailbreak attempt.

The saga of Nawab and of people like him added another element to the history and political economy of Changel. Something was rotting in the Garden of Eden. And one aspect of the rot manifested itself, as Bachcha was told by the villagers themselves, on election day in 1996.

Changel has a voting population of slightly more than 1,600 and two polling booths are set up in the village to

enable the voters to exercise their franchise. When voting took place on 27 April 1996, the villagers told Bachcha, only around 50 people actually voted and the entire process was over in less than two hours. Officially, the village recorded a voting percentage of more than 70.

There was no campaigning in Changel. Not one speech was made and no candidates, nor even important canvassers, showed their faces in the village. The night before the voting took place, agents of different political parties visited Changel. They contacted precisely four people, among them the *sarpanch* of Changel, who is among the richest people in the village.

The Congress agent distributed around Rs 20,000 to two or three important villagers and asked them to make the appropriate 'arrangements'.

The Janata Dal agent also contacted the same people but he gave much less money. His excuse was that the local MLA, who was carrying the cash, had secured Rs 15 lakh in a briefcase under the bonnet of his car but the engine had suddenly caught fire and much of the money got burnt. There was some truth in the tale. There had been precisely such an incident sometime earlier and an enterprising photographer had even managed to take and publish a picture of the burning notes. In any case, the Janata Dal agent said, since his principals had lost much of the cash, he could only dole out token sums and appealed to his contacts to make the 'arrangements' on caste considerations.

The BJP agent too visited the village and contacted the same handful of influential persons. He too distributed little cash but reminded the villagers of the many Hanuman temples that had sprung up in the vicinity of Changel just before the elections, like mushrooms during the monsoon. He explained that these were not spontaneous growths but that the BJP had systematically spent good money to get them built so as to counter the increasing influence of



the Muslim local population. He, therefore, demanded their cooperation in making the 'arrangements' on the grounds of divine duty.

Election day dawned on Changel like any other day. There was no special activity and the presence in the village of eight members of the polling parties with the ballot boxes, papers and other paraphernalia was barely noticed. There was no police presence and even the village *chowkidar* had not been detailed for election duty. At precisely seven, when polling began, the *sarpanch* went to one polling booth and demanded that he be given 400 of the 800 odd ballot papers there. The presiding officer quietly obeyed. The *sarpanch* proceeded to systematically stamp the election symbols on the ballot papers in proportion to the amounts that he had received and when he got tired he got his grandson to assist him. The two finished their exercise in about one hour and left. The polling party breathed a sigh of relief.

The relief was, however, short-lived. Very soon after the *sarpanch* left, the village *pandit*, who also runs the ration shop, arrived with about thirty *khatbey* women labourers. He had rounded them up in the morning and had told them that not only were they bonded to him but that he also 'supplied' them with sugar and kerosene oil, omitting to mention that they paid for the commodities. Further, he promised them five rupees each for placing their stamp on the 'hand' symbol. They did as they were told. Later, of course, they complained that they were not paid the promised money: '*Sab paisa motka apne kha gelai* (The big man—literally, fat man—ate up all the cash himself)'.

The *pandit*-cum-shopkeeper then proceeded to the other booth and demanded that as he had a four-anna share in the village, he should be given at least 200 ballot papers. One polling officer sought to object but his reservations were brushed aside when the presiding officer saw the

country-made gun that the *pandit's* retainer bodyguard was carrying. The ballot papers were handed over and the stamping was done peacefully.

A little later, one unemployed young man from the village, who had recently been appointed the secretary of the Block Janata Dal, came with about ten of his friends. Their exuberance at celebrating the festival of democracy led them to burst a small bomb, not to hurt anyone, but merely to establish their arrival. They were given about 200 ballot papers at each booth and finished their exercise speedily enough.

At about noon, the Block Development Officer (BDO) arrived in a jeep. The frightened polling officers wept as they told him that they were afraid for their lives. In a show of exercising his magisterial authority, the BDO directed the *panchayat suraksha sevak* (guard) to bring his *lathi* and stand near the booth. Then the BDO left. After precisely half-an-hour, the guard told the polling party that he had to feed the buffaloes of his master, the *sarpanch*, and that that was a much more important calling. He too left.

The polling parties cooked and ate their lunch and lay down to have their afternoon nap. Their siesta was interrupted only when the village *bania* arrived and demanded his share of ballot papers to render unto God what was Caesar's. He was given a set of papers on which he stamped over the 'lotus' mark with reverence.

Finally, at about four-thirty, some ordinary villagers dared to go to the polling booths to try to exercise their franchise. They were curtly informed that their votes had already been cast. However, when another villager, a retired senior government officer, went, the presiding officer spoke to him politely: 'Sir,' he said, 'we were told that you always come late to cast your vote. So we have saved up your ballot paper. Please take it. And in case you want any others to vote, we can give them ballot



papers too, even though their votes might have already been cast. We have a few ballot papers put away securely.' He voted but he was told that no ink mark would be put on his finger since the indelible ink given to the polling parties had dried and could not be used.

Thus went the villagers' story.

And thus was polling conducted in one village in the world's largest democracy. The votes cast reflected a certain proportionality of property and influence and did, in a manner, represent the General Will of the kind of society that is a democracy without being a republic, a place where the more things change, the more they remain the same, where history does not move on a straight linear path but through weird spirals which aggravate the old even as they vulgarise the new.



## *Travelling on a Loop Line*

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BACHCHA HAD BEEN far too young to remember when, shortly after the country's Independence, communists had raised the slogan 'Yeh azadi jhoothi hai, janata ab tak bhookhi hai (This independence is false since the people are still hungry)'. Thus, he was not aware of the political-economic critique of the country's ruling order. His own generally apolitical upbringing also made him apathetic to the plight of others. However, something happened in 1967 which suggested to him that there is indeed a relationship between hunger and freedom.

As a student in St. Stephen's College, Bachcha was obliged to attend morning assembly where noble thoughts were articulated with due solemnity. Although, like most students, who could do with more sleep than nobility at that time of the day, the fact that attendance was noted made him wend his sluggish way to the hall. The only redeeming features were when one of the teachers made a gaffe and occasioned titters among the irreverent pupils and, very occasionally, when some significant announcements were made. One such event took place in January 1967. During the winter vacations which had just



concluded, two teachers from the College had gone to Palamau in Bihar to see the famous wildlife park there. What they saw instead was the unspeakable poverty, hunger and even death among a people afflicted by the worst famine India had had since Independence. Their liberal sensitivities were rudely shaken and the instinctive do-gooding of the comfortable middle class took over. They came back to the College and, in one morning assembly, recounted their experience to the students. They illustrated their talk with slides and asked for volunteers to go to Palamau to do famine relief work.

Bachcha volunteered immediately. It was not clear to him whether it was a humanitarian urge that made him do so or merely the desire to get away for a while from the drudgery of formal academics. Was it the naive romanticism of going to villages much like his own Changel to be with the people there or was it merely to be with his friends who too had volunteered? Was it the first stirrings of an inchoate political awareness or only an instinctive pride in Bihar combined with hurt about its condition? He did not know and did not care.

The group of students, of which Bachcha was part, travelled to Daltonganj in Palamau more as if it was going on a trek to a strange land than to a part of the same country to which it belonged. In Daltonganj, the boys were taken over by Dr K. Suresh Singh, a remarkable Deputy Commissioner, a scholar, a tireless social worker and an extremely efficient administrator who had taken up the task of not only minimising suffering to the extent that he could but also undertaking a large number of innovative public works so as to prevent famines in the future. Dr Singh advised the students from Delhi not to attempt grand relief measures or indulge in token charity but to concentrate on a few villages, monitor the relief works there and try to prevent leakages and corruption.

It was thus that Bachcha and two of his friends landed

up in Narasinghpur Pathra, a fairly large village near the tribal belt of Palamau. As far as Bachcha was concerned, Narasinghpur Pathra was the only village other than Changel that he had experienced and he constantly drew comparisons. Narasinghpur Pathra too was dominated by *kayastha* landlords whose large, double-storeyed houses towered over the rest of the village. Around the *zamindari kothi*, in more or less concentric circles, were the huts and hovels of people of other castes, the closest being those of the *baniyas* and the farthest those of the semi-tribal *bhuinyas*. The socio-economic gradation could not have been more apparent.

Unlike Changel, however, Narasinghpur Pathra was a relatively 'developed' village. It had only two handpumps but it boasted of a post office, a government dispensary and a high school. These made it the focal point of rururban activity in the whole region and also created a *haat*, the weekly village market there. On every Thursday, people from neighbouring villages would gather to the *haat*, carrying whatever they hoped to sell: small quantities of sorry-looking vegetables, bundles of wood illegally cut from the nearby protected forests, miserable chickens and little sacks of grain. Traders too came there bringing cloth, ancient earthen pots blackened with the years of oil that had filled them, tiny wooden boxes full of vermilion, the ochre *sindoor* which every married woman put in the parting of her hair to denote her marital status. There was some desultory commerce in the *haat* but the market had obviously lost its zest on account of the famine. There just wasn't enough purchasing power in the region to keep the wheels of commerce turning.

The same, however, could not be said of other economic transactions. Although the successive failure of the monsoon over several years in this already drought-prone area had destroyed whatever prospects there were of agriculture, the moneylenders still demanded their dues.



The indebted labourers, therefore, had no option but to seek work on the hard manual labour schemes through which bunds and percolation tanks were being constructed. Following the Famine Code, the district administration had begun these public works principally to create employment and prevent distress through applying the Indian version of Keynesianism. However, more than mere capitalist economics was practised in Narsinghpur Pathra as the labourers were short-changed by the contractors who paid them less wages than were prescribed and the contractor-moneylender combine also deducted what they owed the usurers. There were light manual labour schemes too for the elderly but the degree of corruption and exploitation on these were no less. Finally, for the truly indigent, there was also a scheme of giving out food doles against red cards that had been given to them. Bachcha found that there was a thriving mortgage market for these red cards. Both the benevolent face of the paternalistic state and the ugly visage of property became much more apparent to him than was possible in feudal, familial Changel where exploitation was hidden by an enduring system of patronage-clientilism.

Bachcha also experienced the real nature of 'voluntarism' in Narsinghpur Pathra, years before the phenomenon of 'NGOs' acquired global glamour. Changel had never had any formal relief or development organisation, either sponsored by the state or set up by private agencies. Neither, for that matter, had Narsinghpur Pathra. However, the exigencies of the famine had created a variety of such organisations. There were caste organisations which ran free kitchens, mainly in towns like Daltonganj, and there were women's groups which went from village to village trying to popularise *ambar charkha* and other cottage industries. Since the general elections were taking place smack in the middle of the famine, political parties too exhibited some social concern.

There were Christian missionaries indulging in charitable exercises and trying to combine a bit of proselytisation on the side. There were Hindu bodies busy setting up *goshalas* (cowsheds) to save cows even as there were frequent reports of starvation deaths among human beings. There were groups of doctors distributing dated medicines that they had received as free samples from representatives of pharmaceutical companies. There were hordes of dogooders from various parts of the country swarming about in Palamau where hunger stalked the parched land. Overarching above all these was the Bihar Relief Committee set up by the former socialist, Jaya Prakash Narayan, who had by then abjured notions of class to take up *sarvodaya*, the uplift of all.

A branch of the Bihar Relief Committee functioned in Narsinghpur Pathra where it was supposed to run a free kitchen to distribute *khichri* to the indigent. It was not part of the brief given by Dr K. Suresh Singh to Bachcha and his friends to investigate the working of the Relief Committee activities but they were faced with so many complaints from the villagers about its functioning that they had no choice but to get involved in helping out at, and thereby monitoring, the Relief Committee free kitchen. They found that the kitchen was being funded by generous donations received from various parts of India and abroad through the central office of the Bihar Relief Committee. Thus, money and other resources were not a constraint. Nor was manpower a problem since not only did the village landlords bring their considerable expertise to managing it but they also dragooned their attached labourers into working there. There was some misappropriation of grain and oil from the free kitchen to the houses of those who managed it but they themselves did not actually eat the gruel that was prepared and served there. What they ensured, however, was that their attached labourers and their dependents were the ones



who were first fed there, before food could be given to other needy people. Thus, if charity did not begin at home, it certainly got appropriated for consolidating property and power relations in the village.

Bachcha experienced another aspect of this same phenomenon in Narsinghpur Pathra. Faced with the fact that the *musahars*, the poorest people there, as in Changel, were facing acute scarcity of drinking water since they were denied access to the few villages wells where there was still some water, Bachcha and his friends determined to dig a well in the *musahari*. They did not think that they would actually complete digging the well and strike water but they began the task anyway in the hope that the district administration could be persuaded to carry on the work at some point of time. Some young men of the *musahar tola* joined them in the endeavour and, fairly soon, a deep pit had been dug. It was then that they met resistance. They were visited one day by the local police sub-inspector and the Block Development Officer who said that they had received a complaint that the well was being dug on land which was disputed as being public. The fact is that although the land clearly belonged to the government and had been earmarked for the Harijans, the local rich had got perturbed about the very idea that *musahars* would have their own well and have access to reasonably clean drinking water. It was only the personal intervention of the Deputy Commissioner himself that solved the dispute and, in fact, the *musahars* got a bore well and handpump in due course.

The *denouement* was not as simple in other cases. The resistance of the landowners was substantial and the processes of litigation were protracted. Death by starvation did not always wait for intervention from Palamau, and Bachcha and his friends experienced a night when a hungry tribal who had come down from the forested hills nearby died even as they watched helplessly.

It was on that day that Bachcha realised that the political economy of death is part of the political economy of exploitation. He was to find out more about this in his own native Changel years later and, for him, Changel and Narsinghpur Pathra became part of one social continuum extending over history.





# Struggle over Land

## (1970-1980)

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THE HISTORICAL PROGRESS was intensified in Changel by the return to Changel of Harivansh Narayan, the person who had gone away to Burma and who had joined the air force during the Second World War. He retired in 1967 and returned to the village founded by his ancestor Dullah Ram, armed not only with a service revolver and a gun which he received as an ex-soldier, but also with a law degree which he had acquired before he had left for his adventures in Burma and elsewhere. He was conscious of his heritage and was determined to get his 'rightful' share of the village properties, single-handedly reversing history. His cousin, Prabhu Narayan, had retired from active life and his nephews, brothers and even sons were still in the cities.

Harivansh Narayan had left the village when the family still had a *zamindari* and, as a young man, had gone around on horseback (to be accurate, on a rather decrepit *ghori*) collecting *lagaan* and generally keeping the tenantry in place. Even the family of the *daroga* of Katra (the same person who had beaten up and arrested salt-makers protesting against the Raj in 1930) had been among the

tenants. After her husband had shown brutality in beating up, among others, Prabhu Narayan, the *darogain* (*daroga's* wife) had, perhaps in compensation, fed Harivansh Narayan *doodh-bhaat* (milk and rice) when he had gone to collect the rent from her.

In 1967, when Harivansh Narayan returned to Changel, his world view had been conditioned by the military and his orientation was anachronistic. He wanted to restore *zamindari* in Changel.

Being essentially a *kayastha* and thus of clerical origin and a lawyer to boot, Harivansh Narayan went about his mission at first through paperwork and the legal process. He collected as many documents as he could regarding the history of the village and in particular landownership at different points of time. From an unused room where it was kept along with Prabhu Narayan's bicycle, a wind-up gramophone, a perambulator, a tricycle and various other novelties acquired by the joint family when it was still unpartitioned (by 1967 it had been split up into six segments headed by Prabhu Narayan, his brother and his four cousins of whom Harivansh was the eldest), Harivansh Narayan excavated an ancient typewriter, bought when he was still a law student. On that decrepit machine, the born-again lawyer typed innumerable petitions and memoranda to the concerned authorities staking his claims which included one on a share of the property of Brijbhushan Das and his descendants in Nepal. Simultaneously, he corresponded with several *panjikars* (genealogists) to establish historical backing.

As long as he concerned himself with these activities, Harivansh was little trouble to others. However, soon after establishing some sort of a law practice in the Muzaffarpur Civil and Criminal Courts, he started filing a variety of suits against a large number of people both in Changel and outside. Even then his antics would have proved merely wearisome, but in 1968 he started



brandishing his guns and forcibly taking possession of various lands in the village. As an ex-serviceman, he got himself allotted plots of public commons and government *gairmazarua aam* and *khas* lands but, given the density of population and intensity of agriculture in Changel, these were not agricultural land per se but roads, lands around ponds, etc. He started preventing people from using these lands for relieving themselves and filed several criminal trespass cases against them. He also staked a claim to part of the fish from the various village ponds which were nominally owned by the *kayasthas* but whose produce had traditionally been used by *khatbeys* and others to supplement their otherwise meagre diets. Like many of his caste-brethren in Changel, Harivansh Narayan too was a strict *Vaishnav*, hence a vegetarian with no personal use for the fish, but he took the measure merely to harass the lower-caste people into rendering *begar* to which he was accustomed before the abolition of *zamindari* had put an end to the practice. He also started collecting *salaini* (cess) in the form of vegetables, etc. grown by the people in their minuscule kitchen gardens or on creepers strung on to the roofs of their miserable huts.

Much of this was done at gun-point and, lest this give the impression of the acts of a demented person out of touch with reality, he convened village *durbars* and made people formally accede to his demands by flourishing at them various pieces of legal paper. He also legitimised some of his actions through the *yadava sarpanch* who was near-illiterate and had to function on the advice of Harivansh's younger brother, Suryavansh Narayan, who was better known as Jatta Lal, the labour contractor who had taken *khatbeys* and others for work to Nirmali and Assam. The younger brother held no formal position in the *panchayat* and had not even contested an election, seeing that the caste balance was such that his attempt would be futile; but on account of his literacy and the

general history of his family, he was most influential in its functioning.

Like every community, Changel too had its 'character' and, through most of the 20th century, Jatta Lal was that 'character'. The youngest of four brothers, he had not been particularly well looked after as an infant and as a child. For instance, since his mother never combed his hair, his unruly locks got matted and resembled the hairstyle of Shiva, the *jata*, that gave him his nickname. From childhood itself, he became a survivor, living by his wits since he had neither physical strength nor, as an underprivileged scion of a feudal family living in genteel poverty, much money either. He was sharp as a student but his family could not afford to see him through school. Nevertheless, he learnt Hindi, including a fair amount of poetry which remained fresh in his memory for decades, and was very good at arithmetic including complex multiplication tables and calculation of compound interest. Besides, as a *kayastha*, it was mandatory for him to learn the *Kaithi* script and he picked up enough Persian to get by; these two languages gave him access to land records, essential for a person whose stock in trade was fomenting and then solving agrarian disputes.

Jatta Lal engaged in different professions at different times. He was a part-time and unofficial *patwari*, a labour contractor, a *munshi* for his relatively better-off relations and most important, the advisor to the *yadava sarpanch*. In that capacity, he had to be aware of any incipient trouble in Changel, the better to make something out of it for himself. Once, a tubewell was stolen from the field of one of Jatta Lal's nephews and even police investigation could not trace it. The owner gave it up as irretrievably lost but Jatta Lal was not one to accept defeat as a detective. His various sources informed him that the tubewell was in the possession of a particular *noniya*. Armed with this information, Jatta Lal gave full play to his genius. By



selectively leaking the news at different times to different people, he got some payment from the original owner for getting his property back, from the *noniya* for helping him keep out of jail, from the policemen as commission for getting them bribes from both parties and from the *sarpanch* for helping him establish his sagacity in preventing a scandal developing in the village. Such was Jatta Lal.

Bachcha was a favourite of Jatta Lal who used to take pride in the fact that Bachcha could speak in English. Nevertheless, Bachcha too had unpleasant encounters with Jatta Lal. Since Jatta Lal's business was to stir up land disputes, he was fairly impartial about doing this. He did not care who got involved as long as he got his own cut. Thus, once he caused a fight between Bachcha's grandfather and Harivansh Narayan over a piece of land in the village *musahari* and tried to get some advantage from both. The land, whose original ownership was obscure, had been long occupied by *musahars*, the poorest people in the village. The *musahars* were so poor that even the name of their caste was derived from '*moos-ahaar*' (those who eat field mice). The homestead that they had built on that small piece of land was the only security that they had since the only other right that they enjoyed by custom in the village was over gleaning harvested fields.

Bachcha's grandfather was of the firm belief that the *musahars* should not be deprived of the petty piece of land that they had built their miserable huts on even if their occupation of the land was illegal. There was a general consensus in Changel over this, particularly since the *musahars* also performed some important agricultural functions and generally helped the landed. However, there were a couple of mango trees on that land and the right over those was not established. Jatta Lal incited Harivansh Narayan to claim the fruit. A bitter dispute developed over this and the *sarpanch* could not resolve it. One day, when Bachcha happened to be in the village, a

crowd of hired hoodlums led by Harivansh Narayan, with Jatta Lal encouraging it from behind by word and gesture, attacked the hutments of the *musahars*. As word spread, practically all the men rushed to the spot, some to take part in the confrontation, some to try to resolve it and some to watch the fun. Bachcha and his grandfather also went running to the *musahari*. When they reached there, they found the huts of the *musahars* being demolished and their womenfolk wailing as the men stood petrified with fear. Bachcha's grandfather tried to intervene on their behalf, thinking that his otherwise unquestioned moral authority over the villagers would help cool the situation. Instead, he was met with a volley of abuse and Jatta Lal, who generally preferred cunning to violence, was so excited that he proceeded menacingly towards the old man. Seeing this, the 'outsider' in Bachcha disappeared and all the primordial senses, deliberately suppressed under the veneer of urban sophistication, came to the surface. He jumped into the fray and hit out at Jatta Lal blindly, forgetting all constraints of age and relationship. Bachcha's intervention was not decisive but the overall disapproval of Harivansh Narayan's method by the village folk who had gathered saved the day for the *musahars*. The huts were allowed to stand and, although the right over the mangoes nominally passed over to the entire village, the *musahars* continued to enjoy the fruit of the trees that stood on their homestead land.

Harivansh was thoroughly miffed at being thus thwarted by the collective will of the villagers and swore revenge. Some positive court verdicts in other cases that he had filed legitimised his position somewhat but Harivansh was not too bothered about that. He saw litigation essentially as an opening gambit and, if necessary, a delaying tactic; he was convinced that force and terror were the effective weapons for, if power could be established through the *lathis* of the *yadavas*, absolute



power in Changel could grow out of the barrel of his gun.

Arrogant about the efficacy of his multipronged force, Harivansh took on his kinsmen and, finally, even the *yadavas* in legal and extra-legal battles. That was his undoing, for then power clashed with power. Until then he had mainly oppressed the meek and the poor *musahars*, *khatbeys* and *dhanuks*.



## *Time Again*

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BACHCHA HAD ALWAYS had a problem figuring out whether time was a straight line, a circle, a spiral or a Mobius strip. He had also not been sure whether personal experience was necessarily exceptional or if it was merely a small slice of the general. What was the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm? Was hell the lack of alternatives or their plethora?

Bachcha pondered over such issues long and hard and always found it difficult to come to conclusions. However, he never faced any problems when it became necessary for him to take gut-level decisions regarding his own life. This was perhaps because he did not take himself too seriously, or perhaps because he actually took himself far too seriously. Or maybe that he did not take others and situations created by others with any solemnity. In any event, he had an incurable penchant for rushing in where angels feared to tread. Could he attribute this to the shaping of his mind in Changel, where the more things changed, the more they appeared to be the same, and hence there was no need to bother about anything other than the transient present? Or was it because of the social surplus to which he had access, surplus that would always minimise risks and enable him to land on his feet even if he got somewhat bruised? Did Changel enable



him to internalise the idiocy of rural life and also to go beyond it?

In any event, when a situation arose for him to go out into the real world after forsaking a conventional career, he was not at all fazed. Lallu, a friend of his through school and college, and he read in the newspapers in 1970 that a peasant war was raging in parts of Bihar, in Purnea and Muzaffarpur districts in particular. They immediately decided to go there and see what was happening. Since Laloo came from Purnea and Bachcha was, of course, from Muzaffarpur, they decided to toss a coin to decide where they should head.

For the next two years, Lallu and Bachcha experienced life, saw its many opportunities to learn, and its ugly underbelly. They encountered immense generosity among the poorest, those who were themselves on the verge of starvation and they also met greed and cupidity. Most of all, they discovered their own *naivete* and came to terms with their ignorance which more than a decade-and-a-half of expensive education had cultivated. In the bargain, they learnt a great deal about themselves, their upbringing and the places they came from. Lallu found out about his rural origins and Bachcha explored Changel from a perspective that would otherwise never have been available to him. And it was enough to blow their minds, together and individually. Both of them found that the dividing line between reality and rationality is extremely thin and it is possible to cross and recross that line with felicity.

For himself, Bachcha discovered that, despite his much-prized 'rural origins', he knew very little about village life and even less about deprivation. The experience had both the elements of the sublime and the ridiculous.

For instance, on practically the very first day that he reached his temporary abode, he learnt of the peasant's passion for land. His host was Hamid Mian, a poor

peasant. Hamid had been still a young boy when his parents passed away, leaving him at the tender mercy of his elder brothers and their wives. They not only usurped his share of the property but also beat him so brutally and regularly that he ran away from home. He had had a varied life after that. He survived for some years by begging in the streets of Katihar and later working as a coolie in Calcutta. Then he became a disciple of a Sufi *pir* and acquired some education, but when he got bored of that too, he enlisted in the army and became a military cook. During his journey through life, he also came into contact with some communists and picked up some bits of ideology and greater amounts of nationalist propaganda. Inspired by these, he beat up a British tommy during the tumultuous Quit India movement. He was arrested and sent to prison and got his freedom only when India became independent.

Hamid returned to his village to find that his brothers had no use for him but the CPI, which was actively organising peasants for an insurrection, did. Hamid promptly joined the CPI as a 'wholtimer' and went around the villages organising the peasants for 'the final assault'. He was a good singer and put his talent to use. He sang '*Dekho lal Cheen pyare, jahan kranti macha re; hame Cheen path jaanaa hai* (Dear friends, look at Red China where the revolution has raged. We too have to follow China's path)'. He also proclaimed '*Asia mahaan dekho Asia mahaan re; aasman mein dolta hai Mao ka nishan re* (Look at great Asia where Mao's banner flutters proudly)'. But Hamid was never solemn. He interspersed party propaganda with folk humour. Sometimes, inexplicably, he would burst into ditties such as '*Mela dekhe jaibai, thekua pakaibai; puri tarkaria re, bandh le gathariya re* (I will go to the fair and cook cakes to take with me. Tie *puri* and vegetables in a bundle for me)'.  
Hamid had an interesting simile for the landlords. He



said they were like leeches: 'Have you ever seen a leech?' he would ask. 'Haven't you noticed that a leech has neither hands nor legs? It has only a stomach. Does a leech work? No! But it eats, and what does it feed on? Blood, which it sucks in such a way that you are not even aware that it is drinking your blood. And what is the way to get rid of a leech? By putting salt on it and crushing its head.' Such heady exhortation thrilled his audience and if no landlord-leeches had their heads crushed, it was not because Hamid failed in conveying his message. It was because, in one of the many policy about-turns that the CPI made, revolutionary insurrection was given up as suddenly as it had been taken up by the party bigwigs.

Hamid Mian and his comrades felt let down when the party leaders started surrendering the arms they had painstakingly collected. They rebelled. And, under the leadership of the legendary social bandit, Nakshatra Malakar, took to a different path altogether. The band of about ten would raid particularly brutal and avaricious landlords; loot their grain and distribute it among the starving peasants. Their Robin Hood activities made them immensely popular and the poor provided them shelter. Of course, there were informers too, and agents of landlords, but Malakar and his gang had salutary ways of dealing with them: they would be caught, tried in public and, in punishment, their noses or ears would be chopped off.

This was in the early 1950s before Malakar, Hamid and others were finally arrested and sentenced to long years in prison. When Bachcha met Hamid many, many years later, there were still a fairly large number of people without noses roaming around in the region. Of course, Hamid had come out of jail an older and perhaps wiser man. He had got married and even managed to persuade his brothers to give him a small bit of land and had turned himself from an agitator against the propertied to

a man of property himself. Bachcha discovered the peasant's passion for land through Hamid: on the few days that they were together, Hamid would take Bachcha to the pathetic little plot at least three or four times a day, merely to look at it and savour its ownership.

Hamid also introduced Bachcha and Lallu to his other friends. Nakshatra Malakar, who had become a legend in his own lifetime—he figured as Bichittar Karmakar in Faneeshwar Nath Renu's opus *Maila Aanchal*—was once again in jail. He was released in 1967; returned to his village; rested for some time; heard about the peasant upsurge in nearby Naxalbari; went there to see things for himself; came back and proclaimed: '*Ab samay phir aaya hai ki Nakshatra Malakar ghore par chadhe* (The time has come once again for Nakshatra Malakar to ride his horse).' The landlords of the area got scared and lodged several cases against Malakar and had him arrested. Thus Bachcha was denied the chance of meeting him. However, there were others: Kusumlal, one of whose sons was a bonded labourer; Lakshmi Mandal who had graduated from social banditry to becoming a landlord's *lathait* (armed retainer), Kanhaiya Manjhi, a Santhal who occasionally had to live on the birds and turtles that he caught, and Jai Narain, a tireless campaigner among the rural poor. Bachcha learnt a great deal from them about the realities of peasant existence and even the simple facts of agriculture.

He learnt, for instance, that the romance about rice transplantation, the stuff of many songs written and composed by urban musicians, is false. It is no fun at all to stand knee-deep in mud during periodic showers. It is even less fun to bend down for hours transplanting the seedlings: nothing else causes greater pain in the back. Bachcha also learnt that there are many varieties of crops and vegetables: for example, after making the discovery himself, he derived great satisfaction from informing his friend Lallu that the green brinjal is not the unripe variety



of the purple aubergine, but a different type altogether, like the white variety.

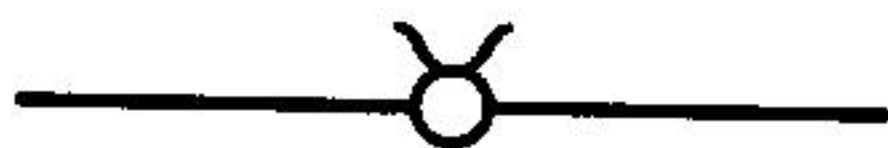
Bachcha also found that the peasants are continuously starved of sugar and that is the main reason why they prefer their tea sickly sweet whenever they can get it. The food of the agricultural labourers was also a revelation to him. Through the summer and monsoon months, they survived on either maize or millets, even in the area that produced some of the finest rice. Maize was roasted and ground into flour for use as *sattu* and eaten with salt and, when available, onions. Or thick *rotis* would be made from the flour and eaten with salt, a little bit of mustard oil and green chillies. Or the corn would be popped, but it is no fun to eat popcorn morning, day and night, when it is the only staple available. However, when the paddy was harvested in winter and even the labourers got paid in kind, there were two months of sheer bliss as far as food was concerned. *Murhi* (puffed rice) and *chura* (rice flakes) provided variations on the theme of rice and, coincidentally, at that time nature too provided different types of beans and other vegetables from its bounty. The rice got spent soon enough and it was back to millets as spring turned to summer.

Bachcha thought a great deal about Changel as he made these discoveries and wondered why he had not noticed these things in his own village. For that matter, he had not even noticed the element of bitter class conflict that always simmered under the surface of idyllic village life that he had delighted in during his periodic visits to Changel. Appearances were obviously deceptive and the rural volcano lay barely dormant even in seemingly somnolent Changel.

## Rural Retribution

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THERE WERE SIGNS of resentment among the poor in Changel too. From 1968, a few young men had started coming occasionally to the village at night, visiting some of the *khatbeys* and others in their huts at the periphery of the village, and talking to them about struggling to end their exploitation and oppression. These political agitators had been inspired by the peasant struggles in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, were informed about the Cultural Revolution under Chairman Mao in China, had been stirred by the student revolts in France and elsewhere, had been roused by the American War in Vietnam, and, nearer home, had seen the people of Musahari near Muzaffarpur rise up against their oppressors. When the movement had gathered force there among the *musahar* and other agricultural labourers and poor peasants, there had been counter-attacks from different directions. The state launched massive measures of repression; the landlords had organised private armies. Jaya Prakash Narayan and his former Socialist but now Sarvodayist cohorts had started a campaign to restore 'law and order' and accelerate development to tackle the menace. These young men, who had left their homes and their studies and who had pledged themselves to the cause of the poor, were forced, in the face of this multipronged attack, to





leave Musahari and fan out into the remote countryside to be, as Chairman Mao had written of the Chinese peasant guerrillas, like 'fish in water' among the rural masses. Some of them had started coming to Changel. They were called Naxalites.

The Naxalites told the *khatbeys*, some *dhanuks* and a few young *yadavas* who met them that the only way of surviving with dignity was to fight repression, to fight the 'izzat ki larai (fight for dignity)'. They also emphasised the inefficacy of guns and other firearms in the face of united resistance by the poor people armed with traditional weapons. Indeed, they extolled the use of traditional arms and, for the first time in the history of Changel, they used the raw idiom of 'class', instead of caste, to explain the existing reality. They urged the annihilation of the 'class economy'—symbolised at that time by the arrogant oppressive Harivansh—by a 'guerrilla squad' to be formed in the village.

In their huddled and secret meetings near the Bhagwati temple where the *khatbeys* had first lost their lands in their encounter with Dullah Ram some two centuries ago, the Naxalites talked of an 'izzat ki larai', but they did not raise the issues of either land or wages which they considered to be mere economism. The result was that while they did manage to plant some new ideas among sections of the rural poor of Changel, they could not form a viable organisation linked to day-to-day issues of existence affecting the deprived, exploited and oppressed.

Meanwhile, Harivansh Narayan was going from strength to strength. He had successfully used all the instruments available to the rural rich to consolidate his position: law courts; other agencies of the state, including the revenue bureaucracy and institutions of local self-government; tradition and myth; religion and superstition; caste and clan division among the people he oppressed;

and, as his ultimate weapon, firearms to spread terror. But as he proceeded in trying to turn history back, he made some tactical and strategic errors on account of his arrogance and greed.

Having to some extent acquired aspects of *zamindari*, he decided that, as befitted a man of his social status, he should take a new and young wife. He did not take into consideration that while keeping harems of several women was almost a sign of status among the landed aristocrats, in his own subcaste, the *karna kayasthas*, such feudal attributes were not acceptable. In marrying a woman more than four decades younger than himself, he ignored also that, among others, his own cousin Prabhu Narayan, a long-time puritan Gandhian, would not approve and in fact would use his considerable moral authority in the village and outside to socially and politically isolate Harivansh.

When Harivansh brought his second wife to Changel, a meeting of all castes was held in front of the temple of *Narmadeshwar Mahadev* where his conduct was unanimously disapproved. But even this did not seem to have any effect. Then Harivansh made another mistake: he also filed cases against some *yadavas* who hesitated in doing his bidding. Until then, in fact, the *yadavas* were his allies, his having indebted them by standing *panha* (surety) for some of them who were implicated in a case of dacoity. At one point, however, he alienated even them and filed so many criminal cases against them that 46 *yadava* women were forced to leave the village for the first time ever to go to town by bus to give evidence in the *fouzdari adalat* (criminal courts) in Muzaffarpur.

This proved to be the proverbial last straw. Harivansh had already upset the apple-cart of economic power. He had disturbed delicate caste balances. He had tried to undo the long-standing patronage-clientelism which



tradition had obtained. He had intensified the exploitation and oppression of the poor. He had flouted ritual norms. But he had been safe so long as he had not offended the new economic power in the shape of the *yadavas*. By his last action, however, he committed this unpardonable sin. And it proved to be fatal.

In 1970, on *Vijaya Dashmi* day, the day when legend has it that the Mother Goddess Bhagwati, in the shape of Durga, destroyed evil disguised as the buffalo-demon Mahisasur, Harivansh swaggered out to his fields on the southern side of Changel, having returned to the village from the courts in Muzaffarpur the previous evening. As usual, he was carrying his revolver. He was accosted by four people carrying a rope with which they said they were planning to catch a troublesome male buffalo (*bhainsa*). Harivansh arrogantly pushed them off the *ari* (field boundary) and then they fell on him. They strangled him with the rope and dragged his body across the fields and the village and dumped it in the canal which his forefathers had got dug during the *zamindari* period. Hundreds of people saw the body being dragged as it all happened at about ten in the morning, but they averted their gaze, muttering '*Vinash kale vipareet buddhi* (When a person is near his end, his wits turn against him)'. The revolver disappeared and when the police ultimately came to Changel to investigate the matter, they could get hardly any evidence on which to build a case. The village as a whole heaved a sign of relief. The evil had passed and order had been restored.

This episode neither resulted in any perceptible social change nor did it become an occasion for the formation of an organisation of the poor. The Naxalite prognostications on this account—that the annihilation of the class-enemy would prove to be the starting point of agrarian upheaval—proved to be wrong. Of course, to date, it is not known

for certain whether this annihilation was an effect of Naxalite politics or whether it was a ritual purging by the village of an evil within it. But very soon in Changel, things returned to normal. And the normal was poverty for the majority and backwardness for all.

In the early 1970s, a series of devastating floods further weakened the economic base of the village. Water management became the crucial aspect of agriculture. As no help from the state was forthcoming in this direction, private initiatives by those who could afford it became the order of the day. Borings for pump irrigation were started. Occasionally, very occasionally, tractors started being hired from the rich peasants of neighbouring villages to plough the land intensively. The parcelling-out of holdings was an obstacle to this, but ways were found to get around this problem by owners of adjoining bits of land temporarily getting together to facilitate ploughing. Diesel-powered pump-sets and even a wheat-grinding machine (*atta chakki*) came to the village and some village boys learnt how to handle tools. Urea, potash etc. became common words in the vocabulary of Changel and in 1983, the first suicide by drinking Endrine (a pesticide) was committed by a woman. The Green Revolution had come to Changel. Globalisation was not far behind. But it was a curious globalisation, full of paradoxes.

Bachcha experienced this early one morning. He had reached Changel the previous evening with a friend who was totally urban and had had no experience of rural life. They had driven to the village and, having had an early dinner, enjoyed the nightfall. As darkness descended on Changel, the sky was filled with millions of bright stars and Bachcha's friend, who had been born and brought up in Calcutta and Delhi, experienced starlight for the first time in his life. He also realised how quickly people went off to sleep in villages like Changel since there was no



possibility of a night-life. The hurricane lanterns and *dhibris*—oil lamps—cast too feeble a glow for anyone but desperate students preparing for examinations to attempt to read. Conversations and quarrels also died out soon after the cattle sheds fell silent for the night. The only option was to sleep, perchance to dream.

Early to bed also meant early to rise although it did not necessarily make the rural folk healthy, wealthy or wise. Since Changel had no poultry, the village was not awakened by the crowing of roosters but there were enough of other sounds to mark the crack of dawn. The early birds chirruped as they sought for worms. Cows mooed. Goats bleated. Babies wailed. Temple bells rang.

That particular morning, Bachcha and his friend were woken up by the sound of the collective crying of a large number of women. Soon a crowd approached Bachcha and loudly solicited his help. It turned out that a snake had bitten a *noniya* woman and her relatives wanted him to drive her to the nearest *ojha*—witch doctor—who was said to be adept at taking out the venom. Bachcha did not pause to think as he agreed: he was not aware whether he was inspired by civic sense, sheer pity or a feudal *noblesse oblige* but he got the woman loaded into the back of the car as he and his friend quickly got into the front. However, he was not quite prepared for what followed. About ten other women piled into the back and continued a loud wail for several hours after that. And, five adults and three children got into the front. The car refused to move over the rough track that passed for a road out of Changel.

It was with great difficulty that some of the people who had come on only for the ride, deprived as the villagers are of any entertainment, were offloaded but it was still with much groaning and grunting that the car moved. The crowd headed for the *ojha* ten kilometres

away. The *ojha* proclaimed the woman dead and pleaded his inability to do anything about her. In fact, he said, she had been dead for several hours and he was no Yamraj, the god of death, to be able to bring her back to life. The backseat wailing which had got slightly subdued gathered intensity once again.

The day was getting hotter and Bachcha's friend complained of the noise, the smell of sweaty bodies pressing on him and the increasing stench from what was obviously a corpse by then. And yet Bachcha could not just drive back to Changel and dump the crowd. For one, he felt obliged to do what he could in the circumstances. For another, his *amour propre* was affected when one of the women who had squeezed herself between the putrefying corpse and her howling mother-in-law said that the taxi driver should not hesitate in going wherever he was told since obviously the relatives would pay him. Bachcha was offended at being called a taxi driver; he thought he was doing a social duty. The fact that the woman who had made the remark had been recently married into Changel and therefore did not recognise him and his social position in the village did nothing to assuage the feeling. The conscious realisation that this represented the conflict between feudal obligation and the emerging market economy also did not mollify him. He drove on but got more and more irritated as the sun and the stink rose together.

He took the noisy crowd to the nearest public dispensary, near the *thana*, another 15 kilometres away. Luckily, unlike the usual pattern, that day the government doctor was present. He too had one look at the woman who had been bitten by the snake and pronounced her incurably dead. In any case, he said, he did not have the serum for snakebite: it had not been supplied to the dispensary for several years although every month he got



a few cases of people who had been bitten by snakes. The serum might or might not be available even at the Darbhanga Medical College and Hospital, about 50 kilometres away, he said, but he advised that instead of chasing after the serum, the corpse should be quickly cremated.

Meanwhile, seeing the commotion and attracted by the sound of the wailing women, a few policemen from the *thana* next door took time off from washing their clothes or cooking their food and approached the car. One of them poked the corpse with his *lathi* and inquired how she had been poisoned. The stench was strong enough but he also smelt an opportunity to make something out of it if he could make out a case of murder or even suicide. His question created panic in the crowd and the bereaved mother-in-law in particular suddenly stopped crying loudly and fell into apprehensive silence. Bachcha was asked to take the car back to Changel and although he was inclined to make one last attempt to try and revive the victim by taking her to Darbhanga, he was actively discouraged and entreated to beat a hasty retreat from the inquisitive policemen. He drove back furiously and in the process a flying brick hit the engine and created a hole from which the mobil oil poured out.

When the lot reached Changel, the car was not alone in having heated up. The smell in the car, a mixture of sweat, tears, fear, frustration and death, was overpowering. And, awaiting Bachcha at his house was an irate aunt who abused him roundly not only for loading a corpse in the car but a low caste corpse at that. While Bachcha himself was worrying about how to get some engine oil from pumpsets to replace the oil that had leaked out from the car, his aunt busied herself getting the car practically dismantled and washed with *Gangajal*. Bachcha's friend had a sudden and uncontrollable yearning for urban life

and wanted to leave immediately: all his romantic notions of the idyllic countryside laid out under the canopy of stars vanished faster than the morning mist.

Bachcha and his friend left Changel soon enough. Only much later was he told that in fact the woman who had died had not been bitten by a snake but poisoned by her husband who remarried shortly after the funeral.





# An Ongoing Journey through Space and Time

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IT WAS EARLY one morning in January in 1996. Changel had shivered through the night and was now trying to warm itself under the weak sun which peered occasionally through the thick mist that lay over the open *chaurs*. The fields themselves were green with the rich winter crops, weighed down by the dew that had gathered on them. Occasional patches of mustard flowers among the wheat fields added bursts of brilliant yellow to the general emerald.

In the village itself, the sounds of *parati* had faded away and the tinkling of the temple bells at the time of the morning *puja* was still to begin. Smoke swirled up from the various *ghurs*, open log fires, around which the villagers had warmed themselves through the cold night and the smoke joined that which came out from the many *chulhas* that were being lit. Buffaloes were being milked and the children who had been rudely shaken out of their sleep by their parents added their plaintive cries to those

of the calves.

At the wells in the village, women were filling their earthen pots with water from which vapour was emerging to meet the cold air. The women chattered and although nothing much had happened during the night, they still had enough to gossip about. The pleasant, even melodious, Maithili was occasionally interrupted by a burst of abuse from the village shrews for whom the only entertainment lay in provoking quarrels.

The men were still, largely sitting around the *ghurs*, keeping the front of their bodies warm even as their backs froze. They would soon have to make their way to the fields, if not to work in them then to enrich them with fresh manure. The fortunate among them would have *jalkhai*, breakfast, while others would wait till lunch to eat something. In this respect, winter was a good time. The paddy crop had just been harvested and even the agricultural labourers had some reserves of rice which they had earned as their wages. They could also supplement their diet during this season with the many vegetables that grew in cultivated patches or on creepers that worked their way up on the huts. Summer would be much worse for food, but they postponed that thought.

From distant Yajaur, all of four kilometres away, came the ominous growl and ludicrous sputter of the morning bus being cajoled into life. It would soon wend its weary way to Patna and return in the evening, representing the umbilical cord that tied Changel and the villages around it to the rest of the world. There were other links too. The transistors would eventually pierce the rural silence and the latest in film music would be added to the *putt putt* of the *atta chakki*. But the links were tenuous and the outskirts of Changel were not very different in appearance from the time Dullah Ram had first passed them.

However, appearances can be deceptive. Beneath the rural calm lay ugliness. Poverty would show itself as



soon as the mist lifted and so would jealousies and internecine quarrels. The class struggle was still incipient but caste rivalries would manifest themselves in many ways and by the evening there would be bitterness in many mouths. Sons would abuse fathers and mothers would curse daughters for having been born since, sooner or later, they would require payment of dowry. There was no bride-burning yet in Changel but there was tension enough between traditional mothers-in-law and the daughters-in-law who preferred wearing housecoats at home to saris. There was conflict too between the landowners who demanded customary subservience and the Punjab-returned labourers who talked back in the arrogant *haan-ji* language of the West.

The repressive aspect of the government was present in Changel but the developmental state was conspicuous by its absence. The jeeps of the officials came only when there were possibilities of collecting bribes and the ghostly electric pillars on which wires were strung had never carried power to the people.

Bachcha was getting ready to leave Changel. He had spent a few days there and was both looking forward to leaving as well as finding it difficult to tear himself away.

As always, he had come there full of nostalgia, even wonder, and had plunged deep into the life of the idyllic village. He was sufficiently unsentimental not to let his heart leap up every time he saw the mustard bloom but at the same time he was deeply thankful that there was some place for him to clear his lungs of the polluted air that had filled them in the city where he lived. As always, he was touched by the generosity of the people of his village and heartily thankful that he was blessed with 'roots'.

However, a few days in the village had also exposed the scars that Changel bore, scars of wounds deepened by two centuries of superstition and stagnation. Poverty,

jealousy, caste oppression, gender discrimination, internecine quarrels and the general idiocy of rural life had found a home there just below the surface of the idyllic village. Worst were the economic and intellectual stagnation and the consequent fossilisation of culture. It was in Changel that the distance from books was most acutely felt.

Bachcha was filled with both love and loathing as he prepared to leave Changel. He touched the feet of all his elders, nimbly moved away as youngsters dived to touch his own feet, picked up his bag and stepped out of his house. He stepped right into a heap of shit, deposited there in the night by some child or woman or perhaps even some man who had sought and found a relatively clean place, away from the snakes and from the irritating dewladen grass that tickled the buttocks. Years earlier, Bachcha might have laughed at this. Today, he cursed the lack of the sense of hygiene and the violation of private property. He was no longer Bachcha.

It was at that moment that I realised that adulthood had crept up on me and Changel was part of my infancy as well as my on-coming senility. For Changel is my village and I belong to Changel.





# Glossary

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<i>Aam</i>	Mango
<i>Adwab</i>	Cess
<i>Adalat</i>	Court
<i>Adhalapath</i>	Loan for purchasing oxen
<i>Adra Nakshatra</i>	Beginning of the monsoon
<i>Aghani</i>	Winter crop
<i>Ahaar</i>	Sustenance; food
<i>Ahaar pyne</i>	Traditional systems of irrigation
<i>Akhbarnavis</i>	Newspaper reader
<i>Alhua</i>	Sweet potato
<i>Amin</i>	Land surveyor and crop assessor
<i>Anna</i>	An unit of currency; 1/6 of a rupee
<i>Arhar</i>	A lentil
<i>Ari</i>	Field boundary
<i>Atta</i>	Flour

<i>Babu</i>	Clerk
<i>Bail</i>	Bullock
<i>Bakasht malik</i>	Cultivated by the owner
<i>Bakkal</i>	Trader
<i>Bania</i>	Trader, merchant
<i>Baniain</i>	Wife of a <i>bania</i>
<i>Banihar</i>	Casual labourer
<i>Bataidari</i>	Sharecropping
<i>Becha</i>	Barter
<i>Begar</i>	Forced labour; labour rent
<i>Belanna</i>	Rolling pin
<i>Benami</i>	Fictitious
<i>Bhaat</i>	Cooked rice
<i>Bhadralok</i>	Gentlefolk
<i>Bhaginman</i>	Tribute or respect given to sons of sisters
<i>Bhagwati</i>	Form of the Mother Goddess
<i>Bhainsa</i>	Male buffalo; bison
<i>Bhaiya</i>	Brother, used derogatorily for Bihari workers in Punjab and elsewhere
<i>Bhalmanus</i>	Gentlefolk
<i>Bhang</i>	Cannabis Sativa
<i>Bharna</i>	Mortgage
<i>Bhoodan</i>	Gift of land
<i>Bhumihar</i>	A peasant caste with claims to Brahmin ritual status



<i>Bigha</i>	A land measure, varying from region to region; in this context, slightly, less than an acre	<i>Dalit</i>	Oppressed; name chosen by scheduled castes for themselves
<i>Bihan</i>	Loan for seeds	<i>Daroga</i>	Police Sub-Inspector
<i>Bijju</i>	Seed-grown	<i>Darogain</i>	Wife of a <i>daroga</i>
<i>Boin</i>	Daily wage	<i>Dastavez</i>	Handwritten record
<i>Boot</i>	Bengal gram	<i>Dawat</i>	Inkpot
<i>Brahma</i>	The god of creation	<i>Devottar</i>	Temple lands
<i>Brahmin</i>	The priestly caste, one of the four <i>varnas</i>	<i>Dhan</i>	Paddy
<i>Brahmottar</i>	Temple lands	<i>Dhanuk</i>	A peasant caste
<i>Chakki</i>	Grinding machine; mill	<i>Dhenki</i>	Dug-out tree trunk used for scooping up and depositing water following the lever principle
<i>Chakla</i>	Wooden platform; plot of land	<i>Dhobi</i>	Washerman
<i>Chamain</i>	Midwife	<i>Dhur</i>	A land measure; 0.02% of a <i>bigha</i>
<i>Chapati</i>	Bread	<i>Diwani</i>	Provincial government
<i>Charwaha</i>	Cattle-grazer	<i>Diya</i>	Earthen lamp
<i>Chaur</i>	Wastelands; common	<i>Doli</i>	Palanquin
<i>Chikni mati</i>	Smooth soil, alkaline soil with lime content	<i>Doodh</i>	Milk
<i>Chowkidar</i>	Village watchman	<i>Dukh</i>	Distress
<i>Cowrie</i>	Shell; used as a unit of currency	<i>Durbar</i>	Court
<i>Dafadar</i>	Village constable	<i>Durga</i>	Form of the Mother Goddess
<i>Dahi</i>	Yoghurt	<i>Fouzdari</i>	Criminal litigation
<i>Dal</i>	Lentil	<i>Gairmazarua aam</i>	Public commons
		<i>Gangajal</i>	Ganga water regarded by Hindus as pure



<i>Gari</i>	Cart	<i>Jiratiya</i>	Cultivation-supervisor on self-cultivated land
<i>Ghee</i>	Clarified butter	<i>Jolaha</i>	Weaver; a Muslim caste
<i>Ghoongha</i>	Snail	<i>Jori</i>	Pair
<i>Ghori</i>	Mare	<i>Jumma</i>	Cash revenue
<i>Girihatth</i>	Householder; <i>malik</i> , a corruption of the Sanskrit word, <i>grihastha</i>	<i>Kaithi</i>	Script of the <i>kayasthas</i>
<i>Gora saheb</i>	White official	<i>Kalami</i>	Grafted
<i>Gora sipahi</i>	White soldiers	<i>Kali</i>	Form of the Mother Goddess
<i>Gumasta</i>	Manager	<i>Kanungo</i>	Learned in the laws
<i>Gur</i>	Unrefined sugar	<i>Karin</i>	Dug-out tree trunk used for scooping up and depositing water following the lever principle
<i>Haftam</i>	Seventh		
<i>Hansuli</i>	Neck-band	<i>Karinda</i>	Manager
<i>Harijan</i>	Children of God; name given by Gandhi to untouchables	<i>Karja</i>	Loan
<i>Harwahi</i>	Ploughing	<i>Karna kayastha</i>	A <i>kayastha</i> subcaste
<i>Hulas</i>	Blacksmith; carpenter	<i>Katcha</i>	Temporary; mud-built
<i>Imarati lakri</i>	Wood used for buildings	<i>Katchherri</i>	Office
<i>Inam</i>	Gift	<i>Kaya</i>	Body
<i>Izzat</i>	Honour; dignity	<i>Kayastha</i>	A clerical caste
<i>Jalkhai</i>	Breakfast; literally, something to eat before drinking water	<i>Kewala</i>	Registered caste
<i>Jamma</i>	Cash revenue	<i>Khar</i>	Reed
<i>Jan</i>	Attached labourer	<i>Khandsari</i>	Unrefined sugar
<i>Jau</i>	Barley	<i>Khari boli</i>	Formal Hindi
<i>Jirat</i>	Self-cultivated land	<i>Kharif</i>	Winter crop
		<i>Kharkharia</i>	Palanquin
		<i>Khas</i>	Own or private lands



<i>Khatbey</i>	A peasant caste	<i>Maithil</i>	Of the Mithila region
<i>Khawas</i>	Servant	<i>Maleck</i>	Owner, master
<i>Kheer</i>	Sweetened rice cooked in milk	<i>Malguzari</i>	Revenue
<i>Khesari</i>	<i>Lathyrus Sativa</i> ; a lentil which has toxic properties	<i>Mali</i>	A caste of gardeners
<i>Khitab</i>	Honorific title	<i>Maliabari</i>	Gardeners' land
<i>Khudkast</i>	Self-cultivated	<i>Malik</i>	Owner, master
<i>Kisan</i>	Peasant	<i>Mamul</i>	Cess
<i>Kodo</i>	<i>Paspalum Frumentaceum</i>	<i>Manjan</i>	Headman; corruption of <i>manya jan</i> (respected person)
<i>Kshatriya</i>	Warrior caste, one of the four <i>varnas</i>	<i>Mantri</i>	Secretary; minister
<i>Lagaan</i>	Rent	<i>Marua</i>	<i>Eleusine Coracana</i> ; a millet; <i>ragi</i>
<i>Lakh</i>	100,000	<i>Maurusi</i>	Occupancy; permanence
<i>Lal Pagri</i>	Red Turban, symbol of the constabulary	<i>Mauza</i>	Village
<i>Langra</i>	Lame	<i>Mehtar</i>	Sweeper
<i>Larai</i>	Struggle; fight; war	<i>Mithila</i>	A region in north Bihar and parts of Nepal
<i>Lari</i>	Lorry; bus	<i>Momin</i>	Weaver, a Muslim caste
<i>Lathh</i>	Stick	<i>Moong</i>	A lentil
<i>Lathi</i>	Stick	<i>Mukhiya</i>	Formal head of a <i>panchayat</i>
<i>Lattha</i>	Dug-out tree trunk used for scooping up and depositing water following the lever principle	<i>Mukhtar</i>	Pleader, lawyer
<i>Lutti</i>	Lighted twig	<i>Mukhtear</i>	Pleader, lawyer
<i>Mahadev</i>	Shiva	<i>Munshi</i>	Writer/accountant
<i>Maharani</i>	Empress	<i>Musahar</i>	A caste of labourers; literally, rat-eater
		<i>Najayaz</i>	Improper
		<i>Nankar</i>	Revenue-free land



<i>Narmadeshwar</i>	God of Narmada, a river in central and western India; represented by a stone in the shape of a phallus	<i>Pice</i>	An unit of currency, 1/4 of an <i>anna</i>
<i>Nasta</i>	Breakfast	<i>Pie</i>	An unit of currency, 1/12 of an <i>anna</i>
<i>Naukrihara</i>	Those with paid jobs	<i>Pokhair</i>	Pond
<i>Nengra</i>	Lame	<i>Pokhar</i>	Pond
<i>Noniya</i>	A caste of salt-makers	<i>Pucca</i>	Solid; concrete
<i>Pachhimaha</i>	Originating from parts to the west of Mithila	<i>Puja</i>	Worship
<i>Pahun</i>	Guest	<i>Puri</i>	Fried bread, a delicacy
<i>Paikar</i>	Itinerant trader	<i>Purohiti</i>	Fees for performing priestly functions
<i>Paisa</i>	Unit of currency; pice; old paisa 1/64 of a rupee and new (decimal) paisa 1/100 of a rupee	<i>Rabi</i>	Spring crop
<i>Palki</i>	Palanquin	<i>Ragi</i>	<i>Eleusine Coracana</i> ; a millet; <i>marua</i>
<i>Pancham</i>	Fifth	<i>Raiyat</i>	Tenant
<i>Panchayat</i>	Local self-government institution	<i>Roti</i>	Bread
<i>Panda</i>	Officiating priest	<i>Ryot</i>	Tenant
<i>Pandit</i>	Learned person, priest	<i>Ryotwari</i>	A revenue system in which settlement is made by the government directly with the <i>ryots</i> or tenants
<i>Panha</i>	Surety	<i>Safa</i>	Turban
<i>Panji</i>	Genealogical table	<i>Saguwan</i>	Hard wood used for buildings; <i>siso</i>
<i>Panjikar</i>	Genealogist	<i>Saheb</i>	Britisher
<i>Parati</i>	Morning song	<i>Salaami</i>	Cess
<i>Patwari</i>	Keeper of land records	<i>Saligram</i>	Ammonite
		<i>Sardar</i>	Leader; Title used by Sikhs



<i>Sarpanch</i>	Executive head of the <i>panchayat</i>	<i>Taula</i>	Earthen cooking pot
<i>Sattu</i>	Ground parched grain	<i>Teli</i>	A caste of oil-pressers
<i>Sawa</i>	1.25	<i>Thana</i>	Police station
<i>Seer</i>	A measure of weight	<i>Thikadar</i>	Contractor
<i>Shaivite</i>	Devotee of Shiva	<i>Tisi</i>	Linseed
<i>Shakt</i>	Devotee of the Mother Goddess	<i>Tola</i>	Hamlet
<i>Shakti</i>	Form of the Mother Goddess	<i>Tulsi</i>	<i>Ocymum Sanctum</i>
<i>Shiva</i>	The Indian god of destruction	<i>Ussar</i>	Uncultivable land
<i>Shradhh</i>	Funeral rites	<i>Vaishnav</i>	Devotee of Vishnu
<i>Shraddha</i>	Reverence	<i>Vaishya</i>	Trader caste, one of the four <i>varnas</i>
<i>Shudra</i>	Menial caste, one of the four <i>varnas</i>	<i>Varna</i>	Caste; literally, colour
<i>Singar</i>	Ornamentation	<i>Varna-sankar</i>	Cross-breed
<i>Sipahi</i>	Armed retainer; constable	<i>Vishnu</i>	A Hindu god
<i>Siso</i>	<i>Saguwan</i> ; a hard wood used for building	<i>Yadava</i>	A peasant caste with specialisation in animal husbandry
<i>Situa</i>	Shell	<i>Yajmani</i>	Patron-client relations between priests and others and between peasants/landholders and various craftsmen, artisans and service-rendering castes
<i>Sohari</i>	Thin rolled bread		One of the four <i>Vedas</i>
<i>Suba</i>	Province	<i>Yajur Veda</i>	Landlord
<i>Sukh</i>	Happiness	<i>Zamindar</i>	A revenue system in which intermediaries collected revenue from cultivators on behalf of the state
<i>Taccavi</i>	Loan for sinking wells, constructing irrigation works, etc.	<i>Zamindari</i>	
<i>Tamba</i>	Copper		
<i>Tanti</i>	Weaver, a Hindu caste		
<i>Tatma</i>	Weaver, a Hindu caste		